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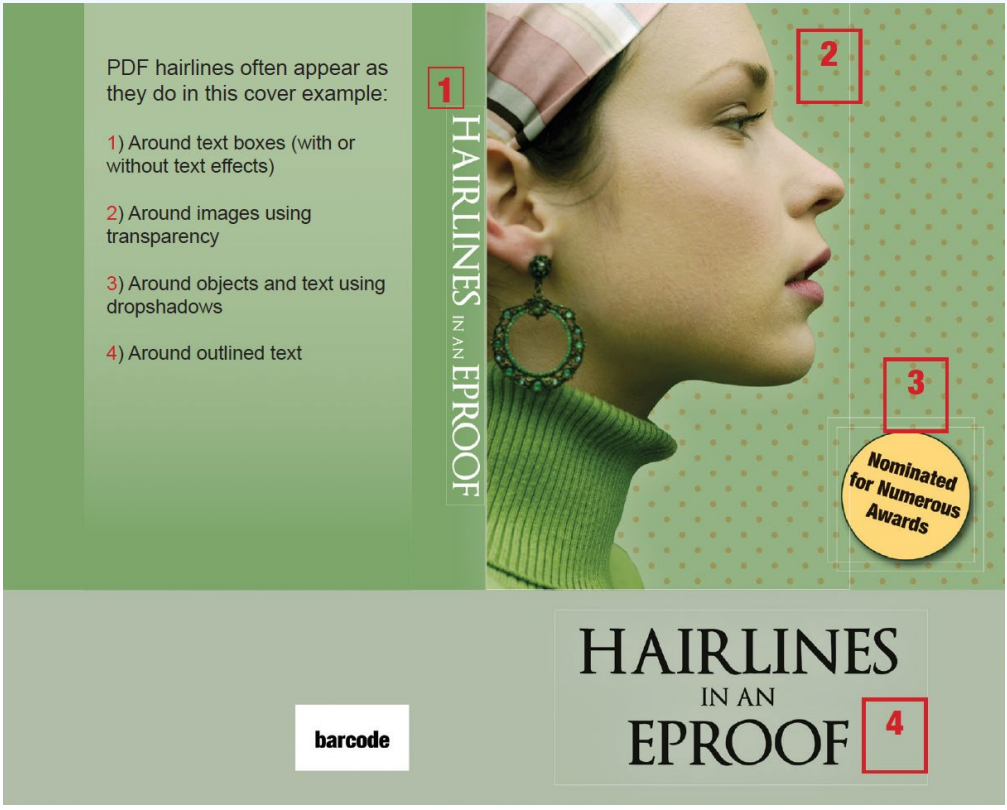
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Content Type: Black & White
Paper Type: Creme
Page Count: 474
File type: Internal

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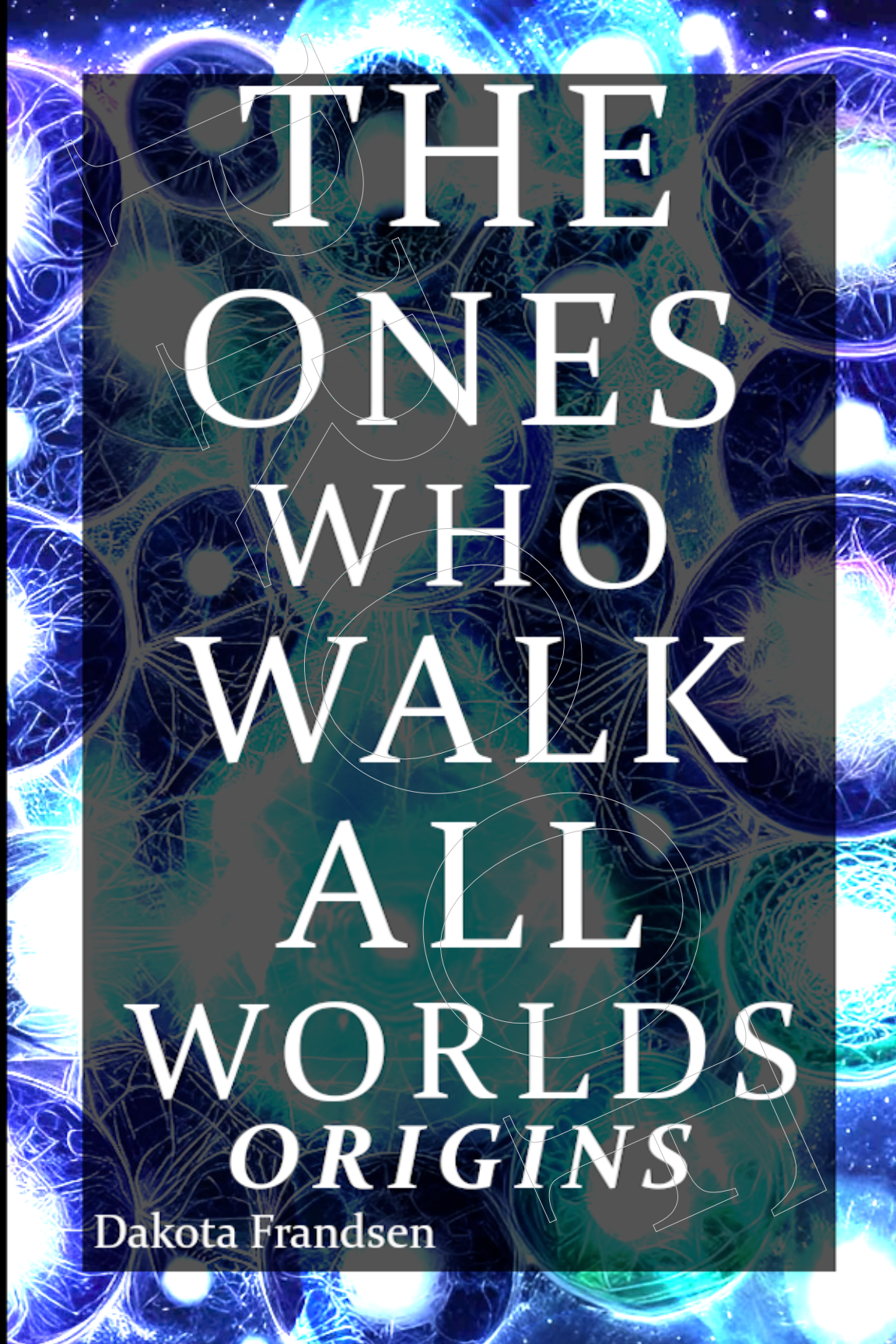
Document Size: 15" x 12"
305 x 381 mm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A Giant's Curse

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Chapter 1
Secrets of Legends

Legends. Tales of great events bound, carried and twisted through the river of time have fascinated mankind for as long as history is able to be remembered. Stories that elders would pass on to their children would fuel the imagination that is found in the arts that would come from their hands. The art then preserved in the sands of time itself only to be found eons later to rewrite the story by the standards of what new minds flourish on the Earth. Some may even try to preserve the image of what happened as if they were just taken, but none will ever know the entire truth. Like salt in the oceans, the more water that is cycled through, the less significant it becomes. That is why the stories of our ancient past have become inferior to those that managed to climb the hierarchy society has placed.

However, thanks to the final threads of seemingly forgotten arts, curiosity, and true passion, exploration of these oceans has allowed for the salt to resurface alongside other forgotten members of history to create entirely new continents.

It had seemed that all of the history's most fascinating tales ended up in these unmarked graves. The very stones that held the names eroded in time thanks to the waters in which they sank. Those with minds of youth or hollow might think the markers were simply unused and forgotten, so they treat them as such and move on. But, as few realize, the very souls of those buried inside secretly hope that someone hears the truths they whisper. There have been several times in which I myself have felt the same way, just hoping for someone

with open eyes and an open heart could hear my message at least once. Then maybe, just maybe the change I had sought to bring so others may learn and to finally allow solutions, to starve the evils in our world, to come forward.

Perhaps it's too ambitious of a vision, perhaps I am a man ahead of his time who is being strangled by those whose ignorance joins hand with arrogance. Maybe my efforts will meet the same fate as other greats who tried to save the world. Unfortunately, instinct is being lifted into the higher realms of the human mind due to udder stupidity with arrogance gated inside, thus not allowing for any intelligence to enter. It has become a common occurrence that made the common life of a small town kid, well, boring. No other words needed, as it would be nothing more than a waste of time. I guess only time can read what has been written in the palms of space.

But regardless of the conditions that come into the immediate sight, what is it about these events, these people that are given praise that is said to be reserved for what is divine, what is it that makes them great? Is it a reflection of the state of the world? Or is it actually something so simple, people over think it? Or maybe it is a result of something that has existed in times before human existence? Perhaps it is a hidden desire for greatness, a struggle to appear as the dominant figure, that fuels this fight. A tiny flicker of hope that gives the neediest the idea that somehow by emulating the actions of the showcased idiotic, they too would meet a similar fate. Unfortunately, the push for dominance is not the only struggle the universe has allowed in play. The second and probably most important struggle is of variance, independence, and intelligence. Nature, no matter where in the cosmos, demands that all must be different, to be able to stand their ground, and if needed those in this struggle must be able to think of a way to take on the issue.

But with every yin there is yang and the battle between the two is what defines the stories we collect in our life, and with the right admiration, those stories become legends. It is a fate I sometimes wonder if I would be able to own with everything I had been through in my life. Everything I have done, all that I have fought, everyone I saved. At least the ones I managed to save.

I guess one can easily get the idea that I had something at least close to my dream life coming together, that had taken some damage over the course of its infant stages. Well, I guess it's about time I finally get down to the purpose of this book, to tell my story. But before I get to that, I supposed you would like to know a bit more about me.

My name is Dakota Frandsen, and I am a paranormal investigator. As many have stated, along with a few published thoughts on the matter, it can sometimes be hard to tell that I am involved in this type of activity. However for me, being a part of this growing phenomena, it is so much more than being a part of a group that goes around looking into rumors of spirits or other strange events.

In fact, the supernatural can be credited at times to being the only thing that has kept me alive, considering I have died four times in this life. Each time

something would happen to send me back and force my soul to be Earthbound. But each time, no matter where I went, gave me an insight of the world for how it truly existed.

So, after a few "enlightening experiences," I finally put together something that some psychics claim had been brewing for nearly 400 years. In fact, it has taken so long to form, to this very day I have no clue how it all came to be. Unfortunately, we were not the only ones interested in the job. While on the front lines I was able to discover that a society that had existed for nearly as long as my legacy, had been watching every page unfold. This truth was what ignited the very war that had preached and raved about since the Gods first landed on our world. During the struggle I was able to uncover what they have gathered on my team; our journals, photographs of our specimens, recordings of our conversations, everything they gathered on us. It was rather disturbing seeing what they had on us, but it also makes me wonder what they were planning to do with us.

I would try to talk this over with the members of my team but due to the circumstances of these last few days of battle, I was rendered one of the two remaining members. In these pages, you will find all that is left of my team so that our messages, our struggles, will not be just more salt in the oceans of time. I will be sure to do my best to channel their remaining essence so that, perhaps, you will be able to know them like I did. Perhaps those who thought they knew me, will learn something of myself they never thought was possible. But as for what is the truth and what is of the imagination, that is something you should decide.

It all began my freshman year of high school. I was just a typical kid at the time, did not have much on me but a couple dimes. My typical day usually consisted of going to class, joking around with friends at lunch, then going home. I never bothered much with dances, sports, or any other event the school hosted so they could squeeze more money out of the students. All I ever really cared about, as far as school was concerned, was whether or not the vending machines would work. There were times few and far between where breakfast was actually something good so there were several mornings where I would grab a bag of chips, and maybe a little bottle of soda to snack on.

As for the supernatural, I had already started working a few cases by myself. Mostly looking into some of the local legends so that I could start building up a little experience, maybe even a little fame. I don't know how but somehow moonlighting as a paranormal investigator had brought a lot of global attention, to the point I started doing radio interviews. I initially didn't plan on making a name for myself this way, but if the people like it, then I might as well see how far I can run with it.

At first, I didn't spread the news about what I did go to school. I didn't want to deal with the bullshit some bunch of morons would try to stir up. I didn't mind an occasional joke but there comes a point where it just gets annoying. But to be honest I was a little afraid of what the reaction could have been if people found out, knowing that it was easy for me to find out their secrets by simply

asking their dead grandpa.

But then something changed, at times it felt like I knew it was coming, but all in all, it caught me by surprise. But to be honest, I was a little surprised as to where it happened. In a class known as Touch-Stones.

Funny name I know. I am not sure how it meant reaching milestones of our lifetime, but regardless it was somewhat of a fun class. I always enjoyed classes that I could see immediate benefit from, so often times for my electives choices I would try to pick classes that would give me more insight on topics that I was involved with in my immediate personal life. But this one gave me more benefit, and teacher if you see this yes it did change my life, but not how you probably would have hoped.

Before I continue I must tell you this. My sense of time has been altered thanks to long, sleepless hours trying to stay alive and secluded long enough for me to write all I can remember. The others have decided to do the same, so they may hold details that I forget to mention in this text. Please, I urge you to try to find their work and take the time to read it as you have decided with mine. We each hold messages that need to be shared with the rest of the world or any world for that matter, so what has happened here will not happen again. You just may find that our stories begin in the oddest of places, mine being in high school.

Chapter 2
Growing High School Sweethearts

It was a typical April Friday in class. The weather outside was starting to warm up for the summer. Everyone was reading through sections of a teen self-help book we would later reenact in a group skit. I never liked group assignments, I was always the one that did the most of the work. But this one was different, people actually got to get a little crazy with it, so people would be more willing to go with it.

I was supposed to be reading, but to be honest I could only skim through the pages. Not because of boredom, because I was distracted by someone. A cute girl with jet-black hair. Yes, I guess I did start to slip into a bit of a lover's stare but to be honest I could not help but feel a sense of familiarity, almost like a deja-vu. It felt like I had met her before, or maybe even a close family member of hers that she happened to bear a very strong resemblance to. I couldn't tell at the time, all I know is that I needed to find a way to get close to her to find out.

“Alright everyone, now that you skimmed through the pages now it is time to get into groups that I will pick for you. When I tell you your numbers you will spread out to others who have the same number and work with them to organize a skit. I will give you about ten minutes to put everything together then you will perform them all in front of the class,” shouted the teacher.

Some of the class nodded in acknowledgment as the teacher began numbering off each student she passed. I watched carefully trying to predict what numbers the girl and I would receive, in hopes of it being the same.

“Dakota, you're five,” she said while moving on. Great, now just to see

what the cute girl gets. I watched the class to secure my prediction. It was helpful that a couple other kids held up the number they received. I watched my teacher's hand as she moved further along the lines of students like a hawk would for the unsuspecting rabbit. Finally, she reached the one I actually wanted to work with. Five. Yes.

When the teacher had finished number the heads of her students, she walked over to the middle of the classroom to start directing everyone to desks bundled together for each group. I monitored the desks designated for group number five to see who else was in my group. Jason Payne, dumb ass. Leonard Lewis, a bit of a moron. Austin Alexander, deadbeat. And Mark Jenson, a mixture of the previous three. I never got along with a lot of other guys growing up, I always thought the others were idiotic at times, wasting time on everything pointless. So seeing that I was stuck with these guys was a migraine from the start. But then again I finally had an escape plan.

When our group gathered at the bundled desks, the girl stayed away from the pack. I guess she was a little on the shy side. That was alright, I would try to ease my way in soon enough.

“Dakota, focus dude,” said Jason.

“Right. Sorry. So what are we planning on doing?” I asked.

“Well we are thinking about doing a skit where two guys are driving down the highway than they get cut off by a psychopath,” he said almost glaring at me.

“What?” I asked, “Are y'all wanting me to be the other driver?”

“Well you did almost hit me with your car dude,” said Austin.

“Fine, I'll be the driver. So who all is playing who?” I asked to confirm.

“I am going to be the director. Jason and Austin are in the first car. You will be in the second car. I am not sure about her,” Leonard said, glancing toward the lonesome one in our group.

“I will go see,” I said with a slight smile.

Leonard, somehow the one that was more likable, noticed and said, “Take your time dude.”

I paid no attention to what Leonard said and just walked up to the girl who had been quietly watching the class from next to the windows. The vibe I got from her earlier slowly changed as I approached her from shyness to tension. Understandable since the tallest person in the entire school was walking up to her, it would almost look like when a small child meets a friend from mommy's work for the first time. I needed to be relaxed.

“Hey,” I said, “Would you like to add in something for the group?”

“No, I don't really work well with groups,” she said.

There was a heating unit that was against the wall, just underneath the window that I braced myself upon to continue this conversation. “Well to be

honest, neither do I," I said.

"Really? Cause you seem to do alright with them," she pointed out.

"Yeah, but I honestly couldn't care less about them," I answered.

"I see. But shouldn't you get back to them so you can find out everything for the skit?"

"No, not really. I got all of the important stuff already. Now they are just talking about some sort of game that was on last night," I said pointing towards the group. As I said they were acting out a football game.

"Point taken," she giggled.

"Anyway my name is Dakota," I said reaching out my hand. When she acted hesitantly I simply smiled and said, "Hey you don't have to be afraid. The worst I could do to you is hug you a little too tight."

She smiled and shook my hand. "My name is Shandra," she said as she retracted her hand.

"Well Shandra, it is nice to meet you. So why don't you tell me about yourself?" I asked.

"Why do you want to know?" she asked almost confused.

"Well, to be honest, I think you are cute and I would like to get to know you better."

Shandra blushed, tucking her head into her chest so her hair would hide it. Even though I couldn't see much I could tell a couple tears started to form. "Hey is everything alright?" I asked.

She pulled her head up and began to wipe her eyes with her hand. "Yeah, sorry. It's just been a while since somebody has ever said something like that to me. Thank you," she whispered. I felt a little relieved.

"You're welcome," I said.

"But you don't want to hear about me, I am not all that special," she tried saying.

"Oh I think you're wrong about that," I answered.

"How would you know?"

"I can feel it. I can feel that you are somebody that has dealt with a lot in her lifetime. I can feel that you are searching for something, causing you to go day in and day out trying to put together some sort of understanding of the world in order to find whatever it is. I can also feel that you are looking for somebody to help you understand it."

I looked into Shandra's eyes to be able to see if I was breaking down the fortress inside her. You can always tell when a wall around the soul has broken when you begin to see something like the auroras start to dance a bit more freely. And inside her deep green eyes, I was able to see just a tiny glimmer. My hammer had started to break through, but still had much more

work to do.

There was a slight quiver in her lips as she asked, “Really?”

“Of course,” I answered, “These days it is something rare, and in several ways, quite beautiful. Especially in a place like this where everybody obsesses over the most worthless parts of life.”

Shandra turned a brighter shade of red and let out a slight giggle. “It seems like everybody in the world is the same way,” she said, “...then the ones that know how it really is get tossed aside and get treated like trash.”

“Tell me about it.”

As she said that I began to see a change in her eyes. She became almost frozen with a look on her face that I was all too familiar with, one of great internal pain. A girl like her shouldn't have that look at any point of her life. She was so kind, yet she was the type that went ignored until something happened to take her away. I tried to place my hand on her shoulder to get her out of that state but as it made contact I began to receive a vision. Shandra was surrounded in darkness, curled up as she would if hiding in a corner. Tears flowed down her face soaking her red t-shirt. My vision slowly eased to her side, where I began to hear her choke on her tears as she tried to whisper the words, “Somebody please help me.”

When I manage to receive these types of visions, it usually means that the other person has opened up to me. They were willing to let me help them. But I needed to test the connection. I know I am making it sound like something you would do when setting up wireless internet on a computer, but psychic phenomena actually work in very similar ways. If this were a computer I would test out the connection by going to a video website and try to watch the first video that came up. But this was a living person I was dealing with, so I needed to find a way to get a message across. So I tried a vision trick said to be used by the deceased so they could speak with loved ones when their minds are in the right state. And Shandra was under the right conditions to make it possible.

What I did was allow for a copy of my soul to move through my arm and make it through to her mind. This would allow for me to scan what brain frequency she was on and allow myself to match it. By doing this I inevitably trick the brain into thinking I am a part of Shandra's vision. Once I made it in I slowly walked toward Shandra and sat next to her. “Somebody please help me,” she cried again.

I placed my arm around her and whispered, “I will.” She laid her head on my shoulder than the vision faded. We were back in class.

Shandra looked at me and asked, “How did you do that?” I wasn't sure how to explain it to her at the time other than simply saying that it was how I knew she was special. Before she could respond, our teacher approached us.

“Are you two working with your group?” my teacher asked.

“Yeah, we got everything taken care of, Ms. Jacobs,” I answered.

“Really? Then what are you guys doing for the skit?” Ms. Jacobs questioned.

Leonard interrupted, “We are doing a skit where two guys that are driving off the highway get cut off by a crazy driver that only ends up crashing.”

“Really?” my teacher looks at me, “So then Dakota what are you playing?”

“I am the crazy driver,” I answered.

She then looked at Shandra, “and you are playing as?”

“I am a bystander to the crash,” Shandra replied.

“Alright,” she turned away to the rest of the class, “You all have a couple more minutes until we start the re-enactments.”

I looked to Shandra with a slight grin. “See? Everything I needed to know,” I joked.

Shandra face turned to a more serious scowl and asked, "Is everyone around here that judgmental?" I tried to keep the peace, but I understood that Shandra may have been through something that triggered these emotions when the teacher came up.

So all I could really do was be honest. “Just about,” I answered, “But keep your eyes open, you will find the few good ones laying around.”

“I hope you're right. Back at my old school nobody was kind.”

Finally, she started answering me about her background. “Oh really? What happened?” I asked.

“I don't know, I wasn't really liked by a lot of people back at my old school and everyone would just keep harassing me about it. It seemed to be the same way at every school I would go to.”

“I know how you feel. It's pathetic how people treat one another these days.”

“Exactly! You never know what people might do for you in the long run that might help you out.”

"I'm glad to finally meet someone else that sees that."

“Well you know the saying, 'The most knowledgeable are the most neglected in masses of the idiotic', it seems to become truer every day.”

“I have never heard it put quite like that before, yet it pretty much covers it all. I'm impressed.”

“Thanks.”

In her eyes I noticed a few more bricks crumbling away as the aurora began to grow. She was starting to warm up to me. That was good, and it honestly it felt good knowing that I was the reason for the smile on her face. “Alright everyone back to your seats we need to get started on the skits,”

shouted the teacher. Damn it. Just as things started to get interesting.

Leonard, Jason, Mark, and Austin all raised their hand, volunteering our group to begin. I guess I might still be able to squeeze in a little more time with Shandra. “I guess it's showtime,” I said to her.

Shandra took a deep breath and said, “I guess so.”

I started to walk to my desk when Shandra hugged me from behind. She whispered a “thank you” then shrunk into her desk. I hurried over to my seat three rows over, which only took me about three steps in order to accomplish. Being tall had its advantages, this was one of them.

Right as I sat down Ms. Jacobs had looked me in the eye and immediately asked, “Dakota! Who all is in your group?” I jumped.

“Shandra, Austin, Leonard, Jason, Mark and myself,” I answered.

“Do you have your skit ready?” she asked.

“Heck yeah!” Mark interrupted.

“Then get up there,” she said trying to rush us.

I could sense a bit of tension in my teacher's voice that appeared directed to me. Which I found confusing considering I was one of the better-behaved ones in the class. I wonder what was going on to make her try to drop a nuke on me when I suddenly get a slight spring in my step. That was just not professional.

Maybe I can ease tensions with this skit. No not with the teacher, because her problem may have been with other students, I was just an unfortunate recipient. I needed to ease tensions with Shandra. I know that I said I was getting her to warm up to me but kind words can only chisel the cement blocks. There is something however, that can easily warm up anybody no matter what situation they were in. Comedy.

Ever notice how after a rough day, watching a good comedy special makes you feel like the world spun in your favor? Or how when reminiscing about a deceased loved one, a memory of a prank they pulled brightens everyone up? How no matter how bad things got somehow they always ended up getting better after something simply funny just happens? Weird how that works right? Well, it is only proof of the old saying, “Laughter is the best medicine.” But it is a medicine that needs to be taken during certain windows of time. Since Shandra had let out slight giggles while we were talking, I knew that the time is right.

The other guys in the group readied our “set” towards the front of the classroom. Mark took an office chair and placed it towards the far right of the room facing left. In its line of sight was a desk positioned the same as the chair. Both were used in place of the cars for the skit. In place of a concrete barrier on the side of the road, there was a couple desks pulled forward away from the rest. Mark and Austin sat in the desk car together, which looked uncomfortable considering it was a single seater. But since they both were smaller guys it somehow worked out. I sat in the office chair and readied myself for the

appropriate moment. Leonard and Shandra positioned themselves amongst the remainder. Shandra posed like a pedestrian on the side of the road. Leonard sat front and center on top of the desk. He crossed his legs and pretended to be smoking a cigarette, getting himself ready to start it all. And with a fake, stereotypical French accent he shouted, “Action!”

Mark pretended to be holding on to steering wheel while Austin acted like to be observing local scenery. “Wow this is sure a nice day,” Mark stated.

“I know right, I sure do hope that something bad doesn't to wreck it,” Austin replied.

While they were talking an idea came to me that would enhance how this skit would play out with the audience. Something that would make the scene more realistic. So I started beat boxing to the first song that came to my mind and flailed my left arm to look like I was rocking out. At first, I kept the noises quite, to mimic the effects of distance, but would quickly get louder. After a couple seconds, I forced the chair to move towards the desk.

Mimicking the sound of tire screeching, I spun the chair around the desk, flipped the other car the bird, then continued driving forward. From behind me, I could hear, “Watch where you're driving jerk,” and “Look out.” I did not pay attention, cause the moment put me under a minor adrenal high, I needed to keep going. So looking toward the barricade, I screamed then ran into it, forcing my body to fly over it.

The class burst out in laughter. From the ground, I looked up at Shandra and noticed that she was a bright red color from laughing so hard. I don't know why but I became somewhat addicted to making people turn to the cheerful red color. Anytime I would see it, especially knowing that I was the reason for it, I would feel a moment of peace. Like that somehow confirmed that I was not going to be the devil some seek for me to be. I will admit I do have a short temper, but I am nowhere near the monster some try to say that I am. I guess that is why Shandra took to me so well, knowing that the world tries to turn us both into monsters.

But for now, none of us cared, we were just enjoying the moment. “Dakota are you alright?” asked Ms. Jacobs after her laughter had calmed.

I slowly stood, slightly dizzy. “Yeah, I'm fine, just uh got a little carried away with the scene, that is all,” I answered.

“Well no kidding dude, you weren't supposed to do that!” said Mark. By this time everyone was standing slowly trying to hold back laughter.

“You know what, it made it better didn't it?” I replied.

“You guys do have to admit what Dakota did made your skit funnier. A's for all of you,” said Ms. Jacobs.

“Well, there you go!” I said.

Everyone returned to their seats with faces still with smiles from what they had just seen. But honestly, I did not care about them right now. I only

cared about one person in that room right now, it was the time I asked how she liked the show. I took a detour through her row of desks to stop and kneel next to her.

"Did you enjoy the show?" I asked with a smirk. She nodded her head while trying to hold back her laughter. I simply nodded and replied, "Awesome."

As I walked over to my desk the next group began to set up a stage. I don't really remember what the other groups did for their skits and honestly, I didn't care. I had other plans the began to fill my mind, plans for another one of my specialties. Tonight was my first official case underneath the name of the Paranormal Raider Force.

PROOF

Chapter 3
Unseen Allies, Forgotten Nightmares

Time almost stood still when I met Shandra, not completely though, but enough to quiet things down to make it feel as if we were the only two people left in the world. Be it post apocalyptic or plague, or even last two survivors of a natural disaster staring into the eyes of the fallen, I didn't care, it just felt good to have someone in the same boat that I genuinely enjoyed.

There isn't a day I can't remember that I haven't played through at least twenty different scenarios where things could turn interesting at any moment. Having to plow through riots after the President declared martial law, taking down a gunman, getting into a car wreck to try to save somebody who was kidnapped, there wasn't a thing I didn't take into consideration. Often times I would use that ability to predict possible outcomes of situations I was put into so that in the end I would turn out the hero for a least pointing people in the right direction.

But for what was about to happen that night, I ran through scenarios based on what I knew about what I was hunting. The case was personal for me; the client, the location, the spirits I was looking for, everything. My grandfather had asked me to look into some strange events that took place at a highway department building he managed. When he had first asked me to do it, I didn't go through with it because I was lacking some equipment. I had all of the basics down. However, the infrared LED’s on my cameras didn't reach very far so it impaired the investigation a lot.

But things had been going well for the last few weeks, so that night I was a bit more confident. In order to do this case, I needed a place nearby the scene so I could be close in case something went south after it was all said and

done. I was fortunate because my grandparents said I could stay the weekend to work on the case. So I took them up on that offer.

The bell just rang to release everybody to go home. I had the unfortunate displeasure of not seeing Shandra to the end since we both had different classes to go to for the eighth period, which was right after Touch-Stones. My class was only a few steps away, while Shandra's was in the gym a few halls away.

Even if we were released at the same time, it would still take her a few minutes to dress down, which was plenty time for me to make it about a quarter of the way home. I sometimes wonder if I should have waited, but I didn't want her believing that I was a stalker. Regardless of what would have happened that day, it was not my main focus. My main focus was getting to my house in order to pack my gear for that night's hunt.

I noticed something as I was walking home that day, something that was out of the ordinary. When I crossed the street while walking from the campus of the school, a large black SUV slowly drove next to me. I kept my pace, occasionally stopping so that I could force a peek inside the vehicle to see who was driving. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted at least three men. They were dressed in tuxedo-like suits, sunglasses, and black fedora hats. One that sat on the passenger side had been watching my every move since they pulled up. Something was not right.

A shot of adrenaline started to course through my veins, forcing me to pick up the pace. The vehicle followed suit. As we moved the passenger of the vehicle had rolled down the window exposing his face. I tried to map the details of everybody in the car out of the corner of my eye to the best of my ability. It felt like I was staring at clones for how similar they all appeared. Average height and weight, pale white skin, heads shaven down to the skin, and no details of aging. One detail that I found disturbing was that instead of lips, there was nothing more than a tiny slit for a mouth. Something was just not right.

I kept increasing my pace until I could see an empty alleyway I could detour into to try to stir them away or fight if needed. Once by the alley I turned and walked forward not giving a care to what was in front of me.

“Shit,” I whispered.

It was a dead end. I stopped in my tracks to look for a door or for some way I could escape. Nothing would spin in my favor.

“Mr. Frandsen. We need to talk,” I could hear from behind me. I turned to face the men in suits.

When I turned all three were getting out of the vehicle. Giving me a glimpse of the license plate.

“Nevada M18I36B23,” I whispered while taking a mental note. The driver had positioned himself front and center while the other two walked shoulder to shoulder forming a triangle if viewed from above. All three removed their glasses. Their eyes were awfully huge.

"You are Dakota Frandsen, right?" one asked.

"Yes," I replied, "What is this about?"

"We just needed to see something."

"Okay. What?"

The front one looked to both of his partners, each nodding their head as if to confirm something to the other, before facing me again. They reached into their waists revealing a silver glare, that had blinded me for only a few moments. When my eyes returned to normal I froze, I was at gunpoint. They fired.

"DADDY!" screamed a familiar voice.

My heart was racing. I used my arms to cover my eyes when I began to see bright white lights carrying me away. I thought I was dead, and this was my ascension into heaven. The sound began to return to my ears. I could hear the creaks and moans of an old house, the bubbles surfacing in a fish tank, and the low whispers of the radio. I was not in heaven. I was in my house, at least a mile away from school.

"What the fuck just happened?" I shouted.

No one was going to be able to answer me. I lived alone. In some ways I preferred it; the only bullshit, drama, or interruptions I ever get is from the television. I hardly ever had visitors that made it past the front door, the only ones that ever did were often repair guys.

However, living alone did add on to what just happened. I don't have a daughter, I don't have any kids. I was only fifteen, living by myself, and making it day by day off of a check I received from helping a few projects here and there. Getting a date was never a problem for me, but I never really dated a lot, and most of those relationships never got to the point where children could come up.

So who in the hell was calling me daddy? I sure would like to know so I could at least thank them. I need to think about this, but the timing could not be worse, I also needed to know who the hell just tried to kill me. Luckily I built a system online just for this type of occasion. And there was a desktop system in the front room with perfect Internet capabilities.

It was called the Akashia, named after the legendary Akashic records. It was an online service I personally designed, that allowed paranormal investigators to research any phenomena documented. One may think it would be a difficult task to put together, luckily my group had international influence so we had quite a few people from all over the world that helped put it together and even help with translation.

I built this system a lot like the medical websites that are online. Users could go in and just type out things that they have witnessed and it would give them details about what it could have been. Right now it was the best resource I had at my disposal.

“Alright let's see what we have here,” I whispered. Sorry I have a habit of talking to myself.

The first item of business, the suits. “Black suit, black vehicle, slit for a lip, large eyes, intimidating. Let's see if that brings up anything.” Loading. One result found. “Perfect.”

The search criteria brought up information from several extraterrestrial cases involving mysterious men in black suits forcing UFO witnesses to stay quiet about something they had witnessed. They didn't intervene for every claim though, which makes things more interesting. When they would appear everything they owned was brand new. No wrinkles on their skin or clothing, no signs of dust cover; everything looked magazine good.

There was something though that interests me, the alleged cause of this phenomena. The suits began appearing shortly after the UFO crash in Roswell, New Mexico. This fact is what causes many to believe they are part of a secret Air Force group that is made entirely of genetically altered units. This does make sense given their appearance. Several alien species had just a tiny slit in place of their mouth and the large eyes could have been contributed by DNA of a nocturnal species. I can think of a few that would match the description, and unfortunately, most of them were not afraid to kill.

Alright, so now there is a who, but why. Why in the hell did they try to shoot me? Wait, something kept that from happening. Was it my daughter?

"Young female voice. Bright lights, changing locations, intervenes to prevent loss of life." Something feels a little familiar about the voice. I heard it before; it was a voice of a little girl. Loading. "Four results."

Alright, it sounds promising. The first listing was about incidents of divine intervention. Accounts where the divine and sometimes the unholy intervene in the situation.

Both heaven and hell have had agents intervene in various cases. In most cases, angels were trying to get somebody out of a deadly situation and demons came to rip apart those guilty of the most severe crimes. The bright lights I saw usually mean angels intervened. To be honest, I am not a very religious person but I took the brights lights as I sign that some higher power still saw me as a good person.

But what was strange is that when angels intervene they usually escort who they were trying to save to an area just outside the blast zone, or even allow for the people they are trying to help to fly with them. There have been very few times where it was just a circle of bright white lights, and those happen on one of two occasions. In our final moments of our current life, we will see the bright white lights when the last loved one who has died comes back to help you make the transition. Sometimes even the family dog comes to help. The second time is often a manifestation of something people visualize when the phenomenon known as "bi-location" took place.

With a typical understanding of the English language, it is easy to tell

what bi-location is all about literally being in two places at once. This phenomenon is observed typically under the conditions of out-of-body experiences, through forms of meditation, and according to some cultures (and some personal accounts according to the Akashia database) through dreaming. One of the most notorious accounts of this was during the second World War when a priest was spotted hovering over a German town in a veil of white light and somehow caused Allied bomber planes to malfunction. This all happened after the priest had made a promise to protect the town.

Here was the issue, how is it that a single man was spotted hovering at the same level as a plane, and was also seen in his regular meditations inside the church at the same time? And now that I think about it, there was another source of light that caused problems for Allied planes in the war. They were known as Foo Fighters (Foo translates to fire). These lights did not originate from any craft because several planes actually flew right through them causing the engines to fail and the planes to crash land. Many people try claiming that these were just hallucinations caused by low oxygen levels and war tensions, but this phenomenon has actually been photographed. While this all looks similar to what had just happened to me, this doesn't explain it.

The next page responds to the "young female voice" part of my search. It is all about the ghost children phenomena. Some of you may think that "maybe it's a normal ghost." Well in some cases it is, but there are also times where children who died while still inside the mother come running around. Sometimes even if the baby is alive and well while still inside the mother, the child comes out in a spirit form to meet mommy and daddy beforehand. What I have always found creepy in these situations is that even though the child may not be fully developed, when they made an early appearance like that, they always looked like they are about the age of six.

That is about how old the girl's voice sounded, a youthful high-pitched ring. But the closest I had to a miscarried child was a couple siblings who had died before birth. Then I notice something familiar attached to the listing under "Personal Experiences." This was where users could write about their own supernatural experiences and the system would automatically link it to listings that explained the phenomena so other experiencing it could get more personalized advice. It was about ninety percent accurate, so to fill in the other ten percent I would allow other users to post links themselves to phenomena they believe could be going on.

I clicked on the link to read into the situation. I watched it pull up a story that was written by myself a couple months ago when I set this up. As I read through it memories started to come back to me, memories about where I first heard that voice. The memory of how I met my daughter. The story read like this:

"I am not exactly sure if the links I have added to this story are accurate, but based on my personal knowledge I felt that these were the closest to what was happening. I ask for those of you who read this to not judge my actions, for now, I know much better and live a pretty good life. But I need for

you to read this and to understand my situation so that more people can be aware that somebody very close to them is capable of what I have almost done. So here goes.

"When I was thirteen years old, I tried to commit suicide. I was the target for bullies at school and at home, and the harassment would get too far some days. I just wanted it to stop but no one would listen to me, and back then I wasn't aware of the resources out there to help people in these types of situations. I wanted to get away from all of it and I also wanted to leave a mark on the people who would refuse to help me.

"To do it I decided to choke myself with one of my belts. So one night as I was supposed to head to bed I went into my bedroom closet and set everything up. It was a rather large closet with enough room to stash a queen size bed, which I thought it was the perfect place to do it since it would also be the last place anyone would ever look in order to find me. I tied one end of my belt to a coat railing inside the closet and let the other end, fastened in a loop, dangle. The support that would hold me up was a little metal chair that I would kick away when I was ready and when the set-up was ready I positioned myself to get it over with.

"But before I could kick away what held up my whole body froze, I couldn't move at all. I tried to fight it but it was no use. Then a bright blue light came out of nowhere and surrounded me. I was stunned. After a few seconds, I could see a blurry image of a man with long hair and wearing a white robe. The man said, 'Dakota there is someone here to see you," as the silhouette of a young girl started walking towards me. As she got closer I could make out more details, she was an absolutely beautiful child. She walked up to my face, I now could see tears coming out of her eye. Then she placed her hand on my cheek and whispered, 'Daddy please don't do it.' She kissed me on the cheek then her, the man, and the blue light disappeared. I was able to move again.

"Something about seeing that little girl managed to get me to snap out of it. The only thought that ran through my head was, 'What the hell was I doing?' I couldn't go through with my plans because of the connection I felt to the little girl. And to be honest I would like to find a way to see her again to learn more about her.

"Signed Dakota Frandsen. Founder of the Paranormal Raider Force, Creator of The Akashia."

Below the story, I could see that a few people replied. The first one looked the longest and appears to have some insight.

"Thank you, Dakota, for sharing this. It is very interesting and I am glad it got you out of that dark place. You still have a future in this world. I hope you don't mind but I may have some information that could be of use to you if you are serious about trying to find the little girl. I am a psychic medium in Boston and I am getting this information from my spiritual guides that are asking me to help you."

My first thought that this could have been something good. A psychic

medium would be useful, to help understand this, if he was legitimate. I never directly assume that someone claiming that they possess any sort of psychic ability until they pass my test. It usually adjusts to match each claim. The rest of the post will give me an idea of what needs to be put up for the examination to see if this psychic was able to live up to his name.

"The young girl that stopped you from harming yourself is in fact related to you. But she has not been able to be born. You were granted a vision of her so that you would have enough motivation to stick around. She will not be around you all the time but you will be able to see her again when you are on the right path. I feel that when you meet the right person and get to the right places at the right time she will appear again. Stick with the path that may seem narrow but will bear many fruits, and eventually, you will be able to see the child where you will be able to learn more about her and when she will come into your life.

"Feel free to listen in on my show that airs every Tuesday online. I might be able to help you more with your journey on air if you would like. Feel free to send it in as an email."

I honestly felt relieved at the news. I could not help but feel good about the situation though, obviously, I must have been a good father if my daughter worried about me before she is even born. But she doesn't need to do that. She is my daughter, when she is born I am supposed to be the one protecting her. Wait a minute.

A flashback came to me from that night. The blue lights, the little girl walking up to me, I remember every detail. Then the flashback freezes the moment she touches my face, thus allowing for me to see her own face much clearer, clearer than I could remember. She looked beautiful, but the sight of her like this breaks my heart, yet burns itself into my mind. The flashback quickly disappeared, returning my mindset to its usual state.

It took me a minute to process what had just happened, but then it dawned on me. The mother of my child was near. But I needed to see how close I was on my guess. I needed to find the right picture.

Luckily, social media has become a good resource for finding people under the condition that they had a profile and you knew how to spell their name. I tried to pull up the first person that came to mind and typed in her name, then I realized I didn't know her last name. Shit. Then again there was an easy outlet to retrieve that information from, school.

But honestly, the only name I needed to know at the moment was the name of my little girl.

"Remember to take the narrow path for it will bear many fruits," whispered a voice. This voice had talked to me before on a couple occasions, even saved me from being killed a couple times. I always thought that it sounded like an older woman, kind of a grandmother-type. When she would start to talk I would listen, cause it always seemed that she held unimaginable insight to every situation so far.

But there was a side effect that always took place when we would cross paths, drowsiness. I didn't mind though. I rather enjoy sleep. And sometimes when I slept my visions and my dreams would intertwine, giving a more poetic prophecy at times. So I shut down the computer, locked the front door, then fell asleep at about 4 o'clock. Which was good because I needed to be awake for the case.

I woke up about two hours later, enough time for me to get ready and cook myself dinner before I left. But before I could anything I checked my dream journal to see if anything significant came up. Somehow I managed to train my subconscious to write down dreams that peaked my interest. Sometimes these would be prophetic, other times they would play out like either action movie or romantic comedies with a little extra “romance”. It was left on a page with fresh writing, as the smell of the ink was still relatively strong.

"I remember standing in a valley full of cherry blossoms, dressed in my uniform. I looked around admiring the scenery, a truly magnificent sight. From a few distant trees, I could see three silhouettes dancing around and playing. One was a large man, one a small girl, and the other a curvy woman of roughly average height. The sound was harmony; the tiny shreds I could hear brought me peace. I needed to get closer. I walked over to an opening just in front of the playing trio and every step I took my uniform changed color, eventually becoming an angelic white. To my sides, two people appeared. Both looked familiar but their faces were blurred. The first had the figure of a goddess that I was drawn to, like a lover long isolated from the heart. I could hear the sound of crying coming from her. I kneeled to try to give her a shoulder, but before I could she disappeared in a golden light. The other person, a young girl no older than six made herself more visible. It was my daughter. She walked in front of me and leaned into my ear to whisper that her name was Olivia. She gave me a kiss on the lips then disappeared in a swirl of bright white lights.

"When they both had disappeared I stood to see the silhouettes had made changed revealing their identities. The man and the young girl were actually a father and daughter. The woman had appeared more clearly, along with rest but her face was still blurred, she must have been the mother. They all were a happy family; walking, playing, all while simply just loving one another. I watched as they moved, it was all genuine. Then all three looked at me and smiled before disappearing. In their place was two more of myself each dressed differently. One is a regular leather jacket, t-shirt, and jeans outfit and the other in my black uniform I wore while on a paranormal job. The look on their faces appeared serious, like brothers uniting to take down somebody who had harmed one of their own. They were ready for battle.

"They approached, eventually placing their arms in to signify unity, each was to place one hand in. When all three were in, our hands turned to fists, igniting energy that took us over. It consumed us, yet it did not harm us, and together we spun like an engine that ran off the powers of the universe. Everything moved so fast, the ground under us was set on fire that launched us into the sky. From the heavens, the three of us combined into one. I could see

fires that formed the symbol for my team, the Paranormal Raider Force, that grew in size as I flew. When I had flown far enough a strong wind terminated the fires and ripped apart the trees. But it was no wind. It was an explosion unlike any other."

See what I mean? Sometimes it gets to be very difficult to translate them when they take place at so many different levels. So for this, I would allow the psychic medium from earlier take a gander at it sometime later. But just for future reference, I jotted down the date underneath the dream. It came in handy later on.

Yet after the excitement of the dream, I could not help but still feel tired. Messed up right? Practically just flew away from an explosion and I still felt sleepy. Sheesh, I thought those types of dreams were supposed to wake you up. But luckily food is a good measure to wake one's self. That night I was thinking of grilling up some bacon ranch cheeseburgers. Not exactly ideal for an all-nighter, but the combination of a meaty meal and the adrenal rush of a fruitful job is enough to keep a large man such as me at ease, yet ready for the next move. At least until the end of November came around and turkeys would all hide in hopes of surviving another Thanksgiving.

The sound of the boiling water boiling the raw patties was awful relaxing that night. Water sheltering cold meat like survivors of an avalanche. I could never find out why but when I cooked (yes ladies I am a guy who can cook), I always found it somewhat relaxing. That is why I could never go professional with it, when a rush would come up it would take the joy out of it. So I always preferred cooking for small groups, usually for a maximum of five people. Any more than that, the quality of my work would quickly diminish.

Figures that one of the only "normal" looking parts of my life was sitting down in front of the television and eating dinner. I might as well have at least one moment like this; when it wasn't so hard to conform to the illusion of reality. It is because of this I sometimes feel like a serial killer; looking for work, not feeling anything, seeming abnormal to others. Yeah, that feels about right.

But the case that night marked the end of that. It was a chance to finally get to live what is real. A chance to finally feel alive. It was the night I would begin to break every chain to society's accepted reality. And it felt great, almost like a little kid's first visit to an amusement park. So many new experiences, so many new things to try, so many places to go, in so little time. But I had approximately six hours to stir up something in that old building.

And it was a clear night in which I held a very good feeling that somebody was going to be ready to play. It was officially my first hunt, somebody was going to take advantage of the nervous energy coming from me. Thankfully food settles nerves otherwise I wouldn't be able to think straight.

After dinner, I cleaned up the dishes and walked into my office to gather my things for the investigation. When I managed to buy this place, it was a two story, two bedrooms, one bath house. Since I was the only one here, I took

the smaller room and converted it into an office. School work, movie production, evidence review, script writing, just about anything that was accessed on the computer was done exclusively here. The computer downstairs, that was used mostly for gaming and checking emails when I felt lazy after school.

I also had a mini-fridge and a table almost covered in forensics supplies in my office. The forensics materials were used when I would examine evidence collected from the more human side of my investigation when the causes of the activity showed relations to criminal activity. Using tricks I had learned from my buddies in the local crime lab, I would use these materials when something other than weird photos emerged. It slowly became a part of my craft.

But that night was just a routine ghost operation, the table was going to have to wait. So utilizing what room I had available I began to gather my gear that had been stored away in the closet and readied my bags.

Since I was running a solo-operation at the time and my income had room for occasional night outs or new gadgets, I didn't have a lot of the gear you would find on television. What I did have was mostly acquired through Christmases and birthday parties. Pistol-grip thermometers, wireless alarms, digital camera, digital night-shot camera, electromagnetic field detectors, voice recorders, and a closed circuit television DVR system with four infrared bullet cameras is what my equipment comprised of in the beginning. Enough for a private operation but not enough to cover all of the bells and whistles showed on television.

Regardless of what people think the paranormal as it stands now is not an exact science. It just has a few tricks up its sleeve. I bet in a few years mainstream science will be able to prepare some new gadgets that will back up what spirituality has been trying to say for as long as civilizations have existed. In fact, I heard that is already happening, so I cannot ignore any side of the argument entirely.

My process for an investigation was flexible but yet it held a general picture. I go in, I walk around listening to each story of the spooks, then adjust my movements to mimic the spirits inside. The flexibility usually sprung from what movements I needed to make, thanks to my access to forensics materials. If any client acted like they have been using drugs, I have the know-how and gear to test for it and forward the results to my buddies at crime lab if the portable tests I used turned up positive. The same went for the times when I came signs of abuse, cause when spirits try to intervene, it usually was a sign that it was approaching a life or death situation.

Luckily tonight I did not have to worry about any of that. The only thing I had to worry about was the smell of cigarettes making my sinuses blow up like a hot air balloon. That and my grandfather had been on chemotherapy drugs for his battle with cancer, but they never caused any hallucinations. Anything he saw I could easily back up. So during the midnight hours, it was going to be a clean case.

However, this one was also a bit emotional for me. My grandfather wanted to come along on this hunt, but his condition made him too tired. I understood that he was going through a lot, but the thought that he would be able to help me make the first steps made the process more exciting. I know I said that I preferred to start off my craft with a bit of alone time but I had a father-son kind of relationship with my grandpa.

There were several points in my life where he was the only person in my family that respected the fact that I was not like other kids. I did not enjoy sports, I didn't enjoy hunting or fishing, but that I had enjoyed other things and he was the only one who seemed glad that I found out what they were.

So when I grabbed a thermometer that he had given me, I could not help but whispered, "This is for you, grandpa."

When I finally had most of my gear packed up I had realized I almost forgotten to suit up. This is where it all looked bad ass. On the far end of my closet, there was my uniform; a long black leather trench coat, custom t-shirt with my logo positioned on the front, black pants, dress shoes with wooden insoles, and a black jungle fedora hat. The idea for it came to me from a visit from a mysterious shadow figure that would appear to people around the ages of thirteen and seventeen, that would often be recognized as a man wearing a fedora and a long trench coat. I wanted to see if by somehow cloaking myself as the figure, it would somehow bring out more spirits from hiding. But, I made a slight modification to it to give a more scary look to it, the eyes.

For the eyes, I would use special contact lenses that change my eye color, coated with a special residue that adjusted visible light into much lower frequencies where spirits are rumored to exist. It was a crazy idea sprouted from failed military experiments, but I made a few adjustments that would reduce any risk of failure. And through all of the eye burning and the time I had put into it, I had the perfect mix.

But I needed to be careful about timing, in the daylight hours the light is too intense and would complicate anything that needed to be done within the next 48 hours because my eyesight would have taken damaged that took that time to correct itself. The appropriate time to put them in was right after the sun had set all the way, which based on the clock on my phone was about an hour and fifteen minutes away. Plenty of time.

I quickly changed out of my normal street clothes and into my uniform. In moments I was no longer Dakota Frandsen, for my Shadow Hunter had taken over. A pseudonym for the feelings, or near addiction, that take over when I was needed. Be it a ghost hunt, a monster hunt, a search for aliens, or finding the criminal in the masses, my Shadow Hunter knew what to do and when to find them. Let's just say I have yet to lose a single soul thanks to him and his allies. Everyone I went after and everyone I would help would always get what was needed in the end. So now it was time to get my grandfather what he needed, answers. I needed to get my gear in my car.

My car was parked outside of my front door about 10 feet away sitting

in the driveway. It usually took about two steps for me to get from the driver's side door to the front door, but with a large haul, I was more careful. I needed to, knowing that people's houses were being broken into on an almost daily basis. They tried to get into my house on a few occasions, but it stopped once I grabbed the guy and nearly broke off his hand so I could get the police some evidence on him. He tried to sue me for assault, but luckily the judge had personally known me and dropped the case.

But even though the guy was caught, I was always careful just in case some other idiot tried to complete the job. So like most people should do, I locked up my doors before I left. My gear was outside with me, always in my sight, so I could watch for people. My keys reflected the light onto the silver letters on each one of my bags, making the acronym for my group appear as it was dancing as I loaded up my trunk.

But as I loaded up the car, something began to weaken my insides. Sometimes when I am getting tuned in to a spiritual channel, a pressure began to build in my chest. I have felt this sensation a few times before, each time my soul would exit my body. When this would happen something intense would have happened. But I was only loading up my car, so what could have been going on?

I remember feeling this pressure slowly push itself out of my body, then within nanoseconds, I was able to move freely across space through a psychic ability known as Astral Projection. This would allow me to have eyes and ears in another place. But when I would enter this state I had a hard time controlling my movement, much like if I was in a dream, so it would move itself to what spot it felt was important.

Everything moved so fast, but yet it did not go far. My projection stopped and peered at my front door where I could see six spirits just standing there. At first, it was all a blur but once it settled into a single shot everything became clear. But at the sight of what was trying to reveal itself, I quickly wished that my senses hadn't cleared up. Five of the spirits at my door was not just anyone, they were my little brothers and sisters who I hadn't seen for years. They all had great big smiles on their faces as if they tried to let me know that they were alright, which started to ease the pain until I watched as one by one they faded away. The last spirit that stuck around had been hiding behind them, was now revealed to be my daughter Olivia.

“Good luck, Daddy,” she said before disappearing.

My projection quickly withdrew into my body giving me back control. When I regained my senses to the fullest capabilities I shook my head to stabilize myself. But no matter what I did to keep myself contained, the thought of what I saw early sent me to an insane asylum. The sight of my family who I had not seen in years on my front door, suddenly fading away had scared me. There was only a certain time that I have heard of something like this happening. When someone who had just died stuck around to deliver the news to their loved ones.

After an incident with my father, all of the kids under his and my stepmother's custody were placed into foster care throughout various locations in the state. Normally, at least that was what I was told, the system would try to keep siblings together, but under the circumstances, they had separated them all to make it harder for any potential threats to their safety to find them. My brothers were in one town; my two youngest sisters were in another, and my oldest sister was kept in the area so she wouldn't have to deal with changing schools. Unfortunately, as very few people would admit, foster care was responsible for deaths of several small children and several that do make it out often turn to a life of crime. So under these circumstances freaking out was necessary.

I reached into my pocket to grab my phone. I needed to call someone to make sure that my family was okay. If I remembered correctly my step-mom was supposed to visit the kids that afternoon. I called her. Pressing the number four on speed dial and hitting send, I began tapping the roof of my car in hopes of it somehow speeding up the process.

“The number you are trying to reach is unable to come to the phone, please leave a message after the beep,” read the voice mail.

Shit. Stay calm, Dakota.

“Hey it's me, please tell me the kids are okay. I swore I just saw them in my house. Just give me a callback or text me I don't care. I am going to be working tonight so I may not be able to answer the phone. Just please let me know,” I recorded before hanging up.

The beeps of my smart phone could not have sounded louder than in that moment as if it was the cue for the divine to take over. Ironically, something had begun to take over, my Shadow Hunter.

Chapter 4
Hunting Time

When my Shadow Hunter takes over, I remain in control. I could turn it off. But he was my closest connection to an all powerful source, so when he tells me that something needs to be done, I listen. He and I are one; me the vessel of this world, he the mind. He was the manifestation of the dark realms that came to my aid in a time of desperation, now he became my eyes into the darkness.

Parts of the world that were too dark for the majority, he could see like a stroll in the midday summer park. There was also a light hunter that was bound to my soul, but he was more vacant than the shadows. Both, however, came to me in times of greatness. Perhaps the night would be the start of one of those times. While on the drive to the case all of my senses began to enhance.

My eyes could see the individual veins in the surrounding grass, my ears tuned the music of plants up to match a concert. Everything became enhanced. This was how I knew something going to happen. But on the drive, there was one task I needed to do before I hit the job. I had a vest packed with small gear and batteries sitting in my shotgun seat. It was a little small when I would try to sit while wearing it, forcing breathing to be difficult. In it was a digital voice recorder I would use to try to capture disembodied voices that I needed for another task. Documentation.

“April 22, 2011, Time is 1910 hours. Case #001. I am currently heading towards the investigation site. The building itself consists of two parts, an apartment, and large garage. Its purpose is to house road maintenance equipment for the small town of Murtaugh, and the apartment used to be the home of the former manager of the facility.

“Those who work there believe that the activity is being caused by the old manager and his wife who had both died shortly after moving away from the location. Both the current manager and the employees have reported footsteps, sounds of the machinery being messed with, shop doors violently shaking as if someone was trying to get in. This investigation shows no sign of potential harm to responders or clients. However, given the circumstances, it is best to observe all options just to be safe. At this site, the wife of the client will be waiting to lock me in the building for the night. Based on the information given the clients it also appears that the spirits allegedly were married while they were alive. So it is best to be on the lookout for Hector and Tonya Johnson. It is best to note that both spirits have been known to possess a temper so it would be best to respect the premises.

“The client had asked me on repeated occasions during our meetings whether or not he needed to position anything in a certain way. I had reminded him that it was best to keep the place looking as it would on a normal workday. If anything was in the building that could compromise the results of the investigation, it would be best to document it for future references for the clients and for future investigations.”

The self-briefing I gave was to help document the experience. Since my team was still new, I had sprung the idea to use an online video hosting service to post results from investigations. However, I wouldn't just post any tape, I would only post videos that contained legitimate anomalies. That way our presence was likely to attract more cases, with the clients under the impression that something was always caught seeing only videos with results.

I know that it was a bit devious to bring in people like that, but it was, in a weird way, a form of business. I never did it for the fame, I did it so that there was an easy way for my clients to know that something weird could truly be going on and this was my way to show I understood it more than anyone else. However, if it did bring fame, I saw that as an opportunity to try out new endeavors to help people while enjoying things I have always wanted to do all at no cost to them.

And that night was my opening to experiment with the idea. If the results turned out well, it was going to be something I would set in stone. If not, then I would just have to experiment with others. Speaking of documenting it honestly, sucks that I didn't have a way to film some of this scenery. The way out to Murtaugh was pure countryside and farmland. I would say it was peaceful but personally knowing some its people, it would be a lie.

If you were the type to want a place away from the hustle and bustle of the city, Murtaugh was a good place to go. On any given day one can easily sit back and listen to the sounds of wind and birds hustling through the trees. Heck, if you stand in the right spot long enough, large herds of deer would walk right up to you. However, if you're ever in the area make sure you have about a half tank of gas. You will need it since the nearest town with a gas station was about thirty miles away.

So I guess that you could tell it was not a large town. People on television try to say they were from a small town because they only had one stoplight. Murtaugh didn't even have that. All that was there was a bar and an old hardware store. Regardless of what the local residents thought, the maximum population was about two-hundred not counting children. A majority of people that claimed to be from there lived outside of city-limits, therefore didn't officially count as residents. However, there is one thing I can confirm, is that the area did have more residents than what the official census states, but they were all dead.

I guess that was why the town was a frequent spot for me to visit. For every living man, there was at least five dead. Spirits that have grown tired of the town of Murtaugh trying to hide the people they killed. Unfortunate for them, it was my job to give those victims a voice. Those neglected and abused by the masses, be they dead or alive, always had a nasty habit of finding me. In honesty, I do worry about what spirits I would find there because I knew how the living behaved. Every wife beater, rapist, drunk dumb-ass, and illegal hid out there with the secure knowledge that the police never are around, all thanks to a woman who sued county police when they gave her a ticket. Even the schools here were committing fraud so they could reap twice the money they could have because they knew nobody would bother to check. In which was the reason I chose to leave, but yet something kept bringing me back around.

I honestly could not tell you what it could have been. This place was a borderline ghost town. Nothing was out there but ghosts. It could be something supernatural that wanted me here. In retrospect just about every time I would come out here, something weird always happened. So for tonight's hunt, I had great confidence somebody was going to come out to play.

I began to see a green sign on the side of the road. “MURTAUGH ELEVEN MILES,” it read. Perfect, since the speed limit on this stretch of the road was fifty-five I would arrive at my case in about six minutes, give or take depending on the train that went through town. As I drove closer I began to see the inside of the Snake River Canyon. I could see the individual folds of the rocks on the interior walls, a tiny waterfall seemingly trying to burst, and a few crows gathered on a couple trees. This was a typical sight out this way. Hardly anything came through here on an average day so the animals have found it to be a bit of a safe area. But with the way our country has been running, there was only a matter of time before the word safe became extinct. That would mean more ghosts for me to hunt, but so much more than I couldn't protect. If I were to survive, I would be one of the few who would be able to write history based on the words of the souls who died in battle.

But for now, it was time to write a hidden history. Which in this scenario only adds a few more pages to what is already here. But I needed to put a few masks on what was there because of my personal connections to the case. If I am to put up the results for the public eye than I do not want anyone bothering my family without both my and their word on it. The paranormal community was a family of its own being torn apart by pride and corruption that

the promise of money can bring. I believe that if somebody had made a name for themselves on a talent they genuinely enjoy, then let them have at it. But doing something just for the money and fame instantly makes you a fraud, which all a whole is tearing apart an almost four-hundred-year-old job.

But for now, I was the only hunter who mattered. The spirits here had known my family for a very long time and it was time to say "Hi." My grandmother was to meet me at the front door of the building to show me around and lock me inside for at least five hours. Because of my age, I needed to cut investigation time in half to avoid any legal issues, so there was a hidden hope to make somebody come out to play.

“Welcome to Murtaugh,” reads a sign outside of the city limits. Within a few moments, I was parking in front of the local highway department building where my grandmother was waiting with the keys in her hand. She had waited for me to get out of my car before unlocking the building.

“Come on, I will show you where the guys kept saying that stuff was happening,” she said.

“That would be appreciated,” I replied.

She opened up the stone structured building revealing a yellow-carpeted hallway that split the apartment from the garage. At the time no one was residing in the apartment, so I had free access to it.

“Where would you like to go first?” asked my grandmother. I looked around to see if I could get a sense of where everything was taking place. The whole location had the feeling of shadows wandering around.

“Preferably where it gets the most interesting,” I said.

“We better get to the snow plows,” she answered. We walked just a few feet to the left into a gravel floor garage with two snow plows and a company truck. From the front of the plow, we stood and she began to point towards the garage doors.

“Do you remember anything about Hector? Grandpa's old boss?” she asked.

“Not much. The only thing I really remember is that he and his wife died about a week after moving out,” I answered.

“Well, it looks like after he died he managed to make his way back here. Because there have been several occasions when those doors would shake individually like someone was trying to get in.”

“Hmm. Well on the days that they would shake was there any heavy wind or large trucks coming by?”

“That is just it. There wasn't anything that could have caused it. When the wind”

She was right. I have been in there enough times to know that when the wind did stir up the garage doors would act like something was trying to go

through them, instead of shaking back and forth. “So by the sounds of it Hector is trying to open up shop, that would make sense,” I said.

“Well, that is what everyone here thinks. His wife also has been felt around here,” she said. Surprise, surprise. A couple that actually tried to stick together after death. It has been becoming a very rare sight.

"I wouldn't be surprised. Now wasn't there an area she liked to hang around a lot?”

"Yes. Upstairs. She would work on a lot of crafts in an area that mostly had nothing but scrap metal."

"Alright. I will definitely try to spend some time up there. Is there anything else that happened down here?"

"Yes actually. Follow me."

My grandmother leads me to a small flight of stairs. To the left was a door that leads into the bathroom. To the right was the main office of the building, my grandpa's office. "Your grandpa had been hearing a few things through here. In the bathroom he would hear voices coming from around the shop, mostly sounding like people at work," she said, "And from his office, he would hear somebody messing with the machines when he was in the middle of a meeting."

"So Hector and Tonya will not be the only ones joining tonight. Cool, that should make it interesting."

"All bets are off until you get finished.. By the way, grandpa said that you could use his office to set up your gear and sneak into the fridge for a drink if you need it. Just don't drink it all."

"Sweet. Tell him I said thanks."

"I will. Now hurry up and get your gear. I need to get some sleep."

With a nod of my head, I hurried out to my car and opened the side door to get my vest. A black tactical style vest that mimicked a special forces type get-up, but with a few modifications I made myself to become a walking surveillance van. Yet I was not sure of how to adjust the size so that it would fit more comfortably and still stay on right. Once secured I popped open my trunk and began grabbing my bags. Four bags full of various gear and two reels of CCTV cables to attach my cameras to the DVR system. Man, it was all heavy. I moved as quick as I could to position my base camp inside the building while there was still daylight.

When my bags were inside my grandma waved a good-luck then locked me inside. Finally, time for the hunt. I reached inside my vest and pulled out my phone to check the time. "8:05" read the display. A little behind schedule, but it was fine. The lights of the sunset still reached through the large windows like the hands of a kind woman reaching into pet a lonesome puppy. It was truly a beautiful sight. But then the tiniest hint of nightfall began creeping through, letting the tiny flickers of stars dance through. The sight of it reminded

me of something, something that gave a true sense of admiration for what was in my life right now. The few stars I could see reminded me of candlelight flickers in the eyes of a soul trap inside its own fortress. It reminded me of Shandra. There must be something to her that is important if she is stuck in my head. Now that I think about it, I was about to start looking for an old married couple that died a week apart. Perhaps I could ask them for relationship advice. What? They were old family friends. It wasn't like I was inviting an Incubus into my love life.

Then the cold sensation that flowed through my body gave way for my Shadow Hunter to take over. Somebody was looking for action. Inside the base camp, I began unloading my equipment onto an old desk.

First I readied the computerized gear, the DVR rig, and a laptop. The laptop was necessary to store investigation materials when the memory card on my cameras ran out of room. I placed it next to a large monitor that was connected to the hard drive of my DVR. This is what allowed me constant surveillance in places I was not present. When both devices were plugged into my power strip and running I plugged in a USB to USB network channel. This handy cord gave the laptop remote access to the DVR and allowed it to function as a second monitor. In the middle of the cord was a thick piece that decoded each device's separate operating systems into a neutral signal they both could understand. This gave me a similar networking set-up that I used with all of my computers back at my place.

Next, to the laptop, I placed a small silver and black case that held small equipment: EMF gauges, hand-held thermometers, a pocket night-vision camcorder, digital voice recorders, and dowsing instruments. Throughout the night I would be swapping out individual pieces of equipment for different types of sessions. However, throughout the night I would keep my camcorder running so if I did see something, it was likely that my camera caught it.

However, I needed to position my DVR cameras to capture images while I was not present in certain areas. Still, in the boxes they came in so they wouldn't get broken mid-transit, I grabbed all four cameras and walked throughout the building. The first was positioned on a step looking towards the garage doors. The second was placed in a tiny room that was hidden away. It had a friendly, youthful vibe to it, almost like walking onto a playground. Hector had two boys, both now full grown adults serving time behind bars. If he was truly the one trying to run the shop, then there is a chance he was replaying memories from his life and could have been where his kids would play. Then I definitely needed to have a camera up here watching just in case. In the small room, there was a small spiral staircase that leads down into the apartment.

"I guess it wouldn't hurt to take a look around in here," I whispered.

As I walked down the staircase, I struggled to hold myself. My feet were triple the size of the stairs making every step difficult. After fifteen steps, I was finally in the apartment. The walls all were covered with dust-covered white paint. In certain spots, the dust wasn't as thick showing that something had been

covering the walls at a recent point. Perhaps old picture frames and posters. The floors were carpeted and reeked of cigarettes. I was not told anything happened back here, but just to be safe I should position a camera in there facing the hallway that nearly hid behind the staircase. Then last but not least I walked out of the apartment and positioned the final camera by the second garage door. Now I had full surveillance. I hurried back into the office to grab duct tape and the cables needed to connect the cameras to the system, placing rugs above each one to avoid tripping over them. The duct tape was to secure the cameras into position so they wouldn't be able to budge. This would prevent tampering until I got a hold of some stands. In the office, I made the final preparations. The time 8:55 pm. according to my laptop. That was when it began while I was kneeled to the ground assembling the power situation.

A woman had sneaked behind me and shouted, "Get Out!"

It caught me off guard, something happening so quickly. I was expecting company but not that early in the investigation. Most of you would have probably bolted out leaving the gear behind, which is understandable for rookie investigators, but for me, I needed to move quickly and find a way to capture whoever was yelling at me on record. I grabbed a digital voice recorder and my night-vision camera and ran outside of the office. Next to the small stair that leads to this hallway is where the fridge stood. On the top, there was a box full of screws that I pulled forward and braced my camcorder against it. In front of it, I placed my voice recorder facing outward towards the shop. Both would emit a static interference that was able to amplify a spirit's voice, or popularly known as an EVP, so I took this opportunity to strike up a conversation.

"Who is out here?" I asked.

Protocol for EVP sessions was to wait at least ten seconds to allow for spirits to speak. Many theories were in place to try to explain why this happens. Some said that it took a few moments for the spirit's voice to cross dimensions; others say that because of the low frequencies spirits are visible in, it took a moment to say what they needed to say. Personally, I believed that it was the latter of the two. It is easy for someone to come up with the idea that there are leaks in dimensional fields that beings we could not see could utilize, the idea is only theoretical until mainstream science has its way.

I started hearing whispers, but they were too quiet to understand. So I kept going with follow-ups. "May I please ask that whoever was screaming at me to show yourself in front of this device on top of the fridge; maybe say your name into the red light so I will be able to hear it later," I shouted.

A few moments later I followed with, "If you are the one who had screamed at me, I am not mad. I am not upset. Actually, I am kind of glad that you did. You see I was brought into help you and whoever else is here gain a voice."

In my head, I begin to hear an older woman's voice asking, "How?"

"I know you're here. I know that there is actually several of you here. And that you have been spooking people who currently work here. I am here to

help both sides understand each other so that you all can be here without troubles. Don't worry I am not here to harm you in any way. I am just here to serve as a messenger, so to speak."

Silence. That was okay, I wasn't in a real hurry.

"I'll tell you what, I am going to get a camera. Not a special one like the one on top of the fridge, just a normal little camera and I am going to take some pictures. And all you will have to do is make yourself appear in the shots. If you can't or don't want to, that is perfectly up to you. But I would imagine that you would like to show yourself, just to give the workers here a scare. I would imagine someone in your position would like to scare people just to have a little fun. I don't really blame you if you did, I would probably do the same."

I sneaked back into the office to grab my digital camera. It was a typical 8-megapixel digital camera, no special features, no special modifications. It was just a typical camera with a really bright flash. I stood just outside the doorway leading to the office and pointed my camera in the same direction as the night vision camcorder. I took one picture, the flash revealed a shadow that began to dart away. I watched the preview screen to see if anything was caught. Nothing.

"Alright, I know you are moving around. Why don't you pose for a picture or two? Or maybe show yourself to the little video camera I have going right now?"

I let the flash from my camera blanket the room. I observed carefully with each shot, watching the shadows move back and forth. A couple did as I asked and approached the fridge, something had to have been caught. Wait where have been my manners?

"Hold on a second everyone. I forgot to introduce myself. I guess you all might be a bit more friendly if you knew more about me. Well, there is not much to tell to be honest. My name is Dakota Frandsen. My grandfather, the current manager of this place has asked me to come in and speak with you. Just to find out how many of you are here. There are only two names I was given of people that are believed to be settling here, Hector and Tonya Johnson. If you two are truly here, then I must ask for you two to come forward sometime tonight if you can. I was told that my grandparents once went to school with your sons and that my grandfather actually worked for you before you passed away. Is that true?" I asked, "If so then I hope you and I can become acquainted."

In the distance, I begin to hear what sounded like a smoker's cough. This was a good clue because both Hector and Tonya heavily smoked and eventually died from lung cancer. I needed to move closer; my Shadow Hunter wanted to move closer. So I grabbed the camcorder and slid it into a chest pocket on my vest to allow it to continue to record; then I reached for the voice recorder and held it out almost like an offering.

Inside my jeans pocket, I felt a phantom sensation of my phone going off. I reached into pick it up, realizing it was nothing, but pressed a random

button to get a look at the time. "9:10 pm." Sunset had been over for a least a half an hour and the only lights in the entire place came from my gadgets. It was time for the demon eyes to appear. I felt my left chest pocket to see if I remembered to slide them in, with success. I stood my ground I carefully inserted the contacts, allowing my vision to slowly adjust. Now everything in the room was visible but held a reddish glow, something that was anticipated. But regardless of everything's appearance, the only thing I was happy about was the fact I could actually see.

All around me shadows would dodge my movements like I was spinning a jump-rope around in a game of helicopter. I did not know why they fled, but if it had anything to do with my appearance, it was almost confirmed that the mysterious figure I mimicked was dangerous. I thought that he may show himself sometime that night.

"You know I am going to be here all night. So you might as well come out and play."

I snapped a few more photos of the room. The shadows had stopped moving. It was about time that I followed suit. In my head, I could hear a deep voice demanding, "Grab the motion sensor."

It was him, my Shadow Hunter. He would often time speak up when something needed to be said, be it an unfortunate truth or a whisper of trickery, he knew what needed to be done. "Set it in the other garage."

The next area I decided, well was politely suggested, to sweep through was the next garage over. The wall that separated the two appeared newer than the rest of the building. This must have been what the recent renovations were for. That probably pissed off whoever was there.

The purpose of the renovations was to split the original garage into two. One for the vehicles, the other for the department's tools. I looked around just to make a mental note of it all. "Put the alarm on the table facing the garage," whispered my Shadow Hunter.

Good idea. If Hector has been shaking the doors then this alarm could let me know if he was getting ready to it. Following orders, I placed the alarm on the edge of the table and faced it towards the garage door. "Alright, if anybody is in here and would like to speak here is your chance to let me know. This here, when I turn it on, it will sound off an alarm when you move in front of it," I said pressing the switch. An alarm sounded off notifying the user that it was armed and ready. "There is your cue. If you want to talk to me anywhere within the next four hours, all you have to do is set off the alarm."

Silence can be a great teacher of focus. This was my moment to "scan" the room, one of my many tricks. It was something that would allow for me to get a sense of what was around me. Much like the scanners, you would see in movies that would detect planes, I would be able to sense threats like this. For now, I just needed to sense whether or not I was in the presence of somebody I could not directly see. The chairs in here were not that comfortable, but it was all that was available and got the job done. I needed to focus.

Breathe in. Breathe out. My signal moved outward. Breathe in. Breathe out. It was empty. I was literally talking to the air. Great. I guess I should've moved where the signal got warmer.

I left the alarm in the room primed for whoever decided to interact with it. It was loud enough for me to notice it from any point in the building, so if I was sitting in the apartment I could respond within moments. However, where the signal was warm I would have trouble getting into the cramped space known as the upstairs, where the landing only welcomed the vertically challenged. Something had been hiding from me up there, perhaps because of my size they thought of it as a safe spot for the night. Well, they are wrong, I have been in places much more cramped to further my career, like old mine shafts. At least in the cramped upstairs of the highway department, I had room to sit.

The stairs that held one of my cameras almost felt like they were about to break underneath me. The age of the place played a lot of tricks like that, some of which could be associated with the activity that allegedly took place. But I needed to see things from the client's eyes, then use my own to see what had happened. Sometimes people tend to be misinformed about the possibilities of what could have happened before their very eyes, other times there could have been other influences that made things seem unnatural.

Once upstairs I needed to lean over in order to walk around. Space up there was just under four feet in height, which would make things difficult, on top of the various objects that cluttered the floors. For anyone who was of average size, this would be difficult to maneuver, so just imagine how it felt for the almost seven-foot giants of the group such as myself. My back had enough problems as is and this only made things worse. But my focus had leaped from my discomforts to the cold sensation that had flown through my body as if I was nothing. I could feel the vibrations of a life-essence flowing through me like ripples in the water. I knew somebody was up there and standing near me. Judging by the softness of the breeze, there was a woman near me. So I sat down and set my digital voice recorder on the floor. "Tonya is that you?" I asked. A gentle whisper blew into my ear, but it was too quiet for me to understand.

"I know that you have spent a lot of time working on projects up here. From what I heard they were actually quite impressive," I said. I needed to get her comfortable with me being here if she was ever going to talk, and when it comes to the artistic type, complimenting their work is an effective method, much like how a comedian enjoys meeting fans in random places just because of their support.

"You know I would love to see some of it. Do you happen to know if one of the pieces you worked on is still here?" I asked. To tell you the truth I was genuinely curious about Mrs. Johnson's work, as I would if anyone else told me they were involved in such endeavors. This gave me much more insight into the human soul than the most powerful of psychics could see.

Towards the far corner of the room, piled with several scraps of metal, the sound of shuffling echoed throughout the building. It looked like somebody

wanted to show off. I didn't blame her, I would have wanted to show off a bit myself if I was ever in her state. When the clutter and clangs settled, a welded horse was uncovered. It almost appeared as if it was made for a child, gentle to the touch yet durable for the accidental drops, traits that are hardly ever put out into modern products.

"Did you make that little horse?" I asked, "It is actually pretty cool. Something tells me that you made it for a child, perhaps for one of your sons? What were their names again?" Protocol for paranormal investigations was to also dig up as much personal information on the spirits to verify their identity. Luckily, I had the appropriate resources to learn about these people, personal friends of their kids, or on easier terms, my grandparents.

"You know, my grandparents actually went to school with your kids. Did you know that?" I asked the spirits. Please don't be offended by repetition, it was another protocol I needed to follow while on the job.

As many could feel when these connections are revealed, the sensation of relief could be felt vibrating the air. This was definitely a good sign. Mrs. Johnson had begun to trust me. "So you wouldn't mind if I stuck around, knowing that you and I have a mutual connection?" I asked, "You know what? How about we play a game?" My colleagues have suggested to me in the past that spirits tend to communicate in several ways, but the easiest method for them was simply knocking, so being that the spirits had known my family for quite some time, I figured it would be best to make things easier.

"Here is what I am going to do, I will ask a question and you will simply respond with a yes or a no. But instead of saying it I want you to knock. One knock for yes, two for no. If you are wondering why I am asking you to do this, the answer is simple. If you knock, I will have a better chance of actually hearing you. If you find some loose metal nearby to respond with, that would be even better. So, if you're up for it please let me know."

I paused to wait for an answer. Silence. As I readied to speak words of encouragement a loud bang came from behind me. I peered to catch a glimpse of what could have made that noise, with the only result being an old street sign propped up against the wood railing. "So you are alright with it?" I asked to confirm my suspicions. Within a few moments, I noticed the sign being pushed backward, slowly inching upward, as if someone was trying to keep it from falling. Then the sign started to dance on its own, like liquid mercury getting ready to dance, as another loud bang sounded off.

Shadows around me began to adjust as if something had intruded. "Is there someone around that you all are afraid of?" I asked, a little nervous of what could be the answer. The shadows continued to stir. The sign started to ring like an air-force alarm. These spirits were afraid of something.

"Hey boss, I am heading home," shouted a male voice.

“What the hell?” I whispered

I sat and listened to the sound of individual pieces of gravel separate

from each step. Somebody was in here. I hurried over to the railing, gripping onto my equipment while avoiding head injury from the low ceiling. With excitement, I focused my gear towards the snow plow where the sounds appeared to come from. From the side of the plow stood a shadowy figure that appeared more solid than the rest, not forming to the objects around it, but stood on its own much like that of a typical person. It walked slowly towards the door moving as if it was just another guy heading home. Opening the locked door, it walked right outside.

I hurried down the stairs with little care to how the stairs felt. I needed to get outside. As I ran out the front door, nearly breaking through it, I was soon to discover I was alone. Tricky bastards. But hey, who could be mad with the view of the starlight? I pulled out my voice recorder to record a statement.

"Time is now 2200 hours. I just pursued a shadow figure outside of the investigation site. From what I was able to tell it was not aware of my presence suggesting that inside the area also contains a few forms of residual energies. This particular spirit appeared to be a male of average height. A former employee of the department liked his line of work. However, something doesn't seem right that it lead me outside. I understand the residual energy could be reflecting a person just wanting to go home after work, but something about this feels different. What could there be out here that they want me to see?"

I took a moment to think about the situation, then I remembered something. "Wait. I remember reading about an old legend that is in the area. The sighting of a young boy playing around the railroad tracks with a chainsaw in hand. I wonder if it is possible we can get the boy to come out and play."

Murtaugh was a small town, much smaller than what a majority of people would describe as such. The only two stores in town that made a decent living was a bar and a tool shop. Both were within fifty feet of one another.

The bar was said to have been haunted itself, but since the owner himself often was in trouble with the law, I wouldn't take it seriously. Between the bar and the highway department building was an old set of railroad tracks, that held a few interesting stories of their own. However what worried me was that around this section it was not stories of cars stuck on the tracks, or even the suicide of a broken heart like this town was notorious for. But a rather interesting story of a small boy running around with a chainsaw. Given that the bar was about twenty feet away from the tracks my immediate thought was that it was simply a hallucination, but if there was some truth it would make for an interesting story. Not only that, it gave me an excuse to admire the starlight.

Each step I took moving closer to the tracks felt like some sort of journey through uncharted territory, streets that I used to walk now covered in shadow. A security blanket for the darkness of each soul so they could dance freely. The screams, the howls of coyotes in the distance, rumors of spirits roaming freely in the whispers of a ghost town. This was the setup for a death in a thriller movie. The wind stirred up near the abandoned buildings, adding whistles and rustles of leafs to the scene. Somebody was ready to play.

Giggling of a small boy circled around me. The sensation felt like a sneaky little brother trying to attack an older sibling, a sensation I missed from my own family. But it was clear I had somebody's attention.

"I hear that there is a young man out here who likes to play. Why don't you come on out? I won't hurt you," I shouted. The giggling grew louder, almost sounding like multiple children. Like typical Idaho wind, it silenced quicker then it started. But the rustling of the bushes continued. "Is that you young man, or is it another neglected dog?" I asked.

The rustling grew louder as if the plants tried to intimidate a potential threat.

"I see," I whispered.

The bushes ended their dance as the chainsaw started to scream from behind. I slowly slipped my gear into my pockets and readied for the attack. Behind me, I could see a small group of sagebrush that shook like an animal was hiding inside ready to pounce. The blade of a small chainsaw slowly grew outward, aimed for my legs.

"I'm gonna get you!" shouted the little boy. A bright white light slowly grew around me, changing the color of my uniform. About time he came to visit.

The sliding of the chains grew stronger as the boy rushed forward. Tiny feet smacking against the hard road, with each other step seemingly labored by a heavy machine. A minor flaw for an attack, desserts for the attacked. The sounds of the engine grew quickly. All stopped by an angelic hand.

"What the!" shrieked the young boy. As many would probably be shocked of, and perhaps a little intimidated by, my hand had stopped the chainsaw.

The boy looked up to see my face, with and admiration close to that of a superhero. "Better be careful young man. You may end up hurting someone," I said. Something about my voice triggered a sense of familiarity to the child.

"You!" he shouted.

"What about me?" I asked.

"You are from the prophecy."

"What do you mean?"

"A man who stares in shadow with an eye that holds a storm will gather eight souls to join him as he walks the night making a power of eleven. His team will comprise of One, a giant with a soul of light and dark. One, a wounded warrior of the past. One, the daughter not bound to time. Two sisters soaked in loss and blood. One, child of the stars. I uh think there is more but I am not sure. There is something about a great change that comes when they come together after a great battle emerges."

The thought of being involved with a prophecy was a headache, and it coming from a child doesn't help. The look in his eyes was a mix of admiration,

fear, and a hidden slice of hope. The little guy was serious about this. "That sounds interesting," I said, desperately trying to keep my mind from boiling.

"If I am right then you can help me," he said.

“How so?”

"I need you to help me cross over. I don't want to be tied down here when it begins."

"When what begins?"

"The war. Please, you have to help me before things move any further."

I could see the fear in his eyes, whatever was coming was going to be intense. "Alright, I'll see what I can do," I answered. How would I be able to help this kid? My Light Hunter once again took over, I had no control. From a wave of a hand a bright light appeared on the tracks, a doorway into the great serenity.

"Go, there will be people waiting for you on the other side," said My Light Hunter.

"I know. I hope that because I was never born I get another chance," he whispered.

"That is one of the many reasons for reincarnation my friend. So we can live a completely new life to add to the knowledge of the cosmos."

"I hope you are right Dakota. Good luck on your path."

“Thanks.”

The little boy walked towards the light. The sight reminded me of seeing a small child on their first day of school. Nervous, frightened, thoughts rolling through his head like semi-trucks rolling on a downhill highway with broken brakes with the only hope of stopping was for it to all come crashing down, yeah it was all too familiar.

Then I remembered something my grandpa did that helped me relax a bit that gave me an idea.

"Hey," I called out to the child. He turned to face me with the look of worry. "Don't get too crazy with the chainsaw, okay?" I joked.

The boy giggled and walked through the light. I watched as his soul became the very light he entered. It was an amazing sight. When the light closed its door, a gentle breeze moved outward like an explosion, whispering that someone has left this realm. I looked towards the stars and noticed that a star was moving on its own, not shooting across the sky, but slid across like it was a lily pad in a pond.

My focus was not extraterrestrials, given the number of air force bases in the area. But this one intrigued me. It appeared to react to the light I summoned to help the child across the divide. I wondered what it could have been doing, but my sights quickly soured with the black mists in the horizon slowly fading away. I have seen those formations before and they usually

indicated that it was a dark being moving around.

With one final glimpse of the stars, I decided it was best for me to return to the case. There will be a special collection for the events that happened outside, but it would not be observed as the main case. In some cases it would not be a good idea to leave a case like this, but the town was located in the nearest sense of nowhere I could think possible, the only thing that could interrupt the case was a loose animal. I also knew my client would not mind at all, given that it was phenomena close to the original site.

Throughout the night, I spent my time trying to communicate with whoever was still in the building. But after I had reentered, it all died down. I was barely able to pick up any sense of a spirit. In fact, the only incident that I was able to document was interaction with the alarm earlier. So with heavy eyes and the final strokes of an awakened mind I had offered up a deal to the spirits using the motion sensor.

"Alright, it is almost time for me to go, and I know that you all are not wanting to talk much, so let us make a deal right here. If whoever was just talking to me using the alarm is still here, I would like for you to do it just one more time. If you guys promise me to settle down and not spook or harm anyone that comes through here on a normal day, I will no longer come to stay the night to bother you again. I will still be around, I might say 'Hello', but I will not stay to bother you. But only if you do not hurt anybody unless they had it coming. If you agree to these terms, I will pack up my stuff and go right now. Again you cannot harm anyone, do you understand me? If so then sound off the alarm," I shouted. In the moments of silence, I could feel the sensation that someone in the room was confused about the terms.

"I don't care if you occasionally give an employee here a good scare just to have a little fun, just don't go too far and don't even try to hurt anyone unless it is in a form of defense. Does that clear things up?" I asked. The alarm screamed.

"Alright. Thank you for your time. I will now pack up my things and go. You won't have to deal with me anymore as long as you keep to your side of the agreement," I said. My cameras and voice recorders were tucked into my vest which I began to unstrap once I silenced and holstered the alarm. It was time for me to go, as I had promised.

As with many endeavors that allow one to climb the appropriate ladders, disassembling my investigation was quicker than putting it all together. The cords, the battery packs, everything was neatly put away and hauled into the trunk of my car. My vest was placed back into the shotgun seat so I could prepare the self-debriefing before the ride. In the last moments I doubled checked the entire building to make sure that I didn't forget anything and when it all checked out I locked up and walked out to my car. From the driver's side, I pulled out my digital recorder and readied myself for the final words of the night.

"It is approximately 0200 hours on the 23rd of April of the year 2011. I

had finally finished the investigation at the highway department building, with bets on impressive results coming in the evidence review. Tonight several events took place that almost wrote a horror novel on its own, on top of adding to a few mysteries that had yet to be solved. I am honestly too tired to talk much further, and knowing that I have thirty hours of footage to look through within the next couple of weeks I should probably shut up and get into bed. All in all, it was a good night that marks a historical event," I said into the microphone. I tucked the recorder into the vest and drove to my grandparent's house so I could stay the night.

The drive felt much longer than it was that night. My grandparent's house was about half a mile away, with nothing but a few farms and a couple houses on each side of the street. Some might say it was a pleasant part of the area, but at night it was almost a recipe for disaster because of the lack of excitement to keep a driver awake. One might get lucky and tenderize a deer on impact, but often times they would just stand up and walk away after being hit. Sometimes they even seem to get a bit of an attitude after surviving an event like that, but that only really happened in the spring. On a hill was where my grandparents lived, and that was where I needed to make a turn.

I pulled into the driveway as slowly as I could to avoid stirring up the pack of dogs my grandparent's owned. They were already outside and started barking, alerting the rest that an unknown presence has entered their turf. I hurried over to the fence of the backyard, leaving my gear behind in a locked vehicle for the night, to let them know it was me. My grandmother had been waiting outside in a nightgown watching over the dogs when she saw me.

"How did it go?" she asked.

"Well, it was interesting, to say the least. I am pretty sure something was caught on the gear," I answered.

"Good, so are you just going to leave your stuff in the car until morning?"

"Yeah, I am just too tired to carry it all in. I am going to start looking through it tomorrow."

"Alright, but you might want to be careful about what you try to look through. Your mom and your aunt are visiting tomorrow."

Shit. When my mother and my aunt were visiting that meant four high pitched squeals, or better known as my sister and cousins, could cover anything I was trying to do. Again like I said before I like kids, but I was at a point in my life where I needed to worry about myself more than anyone else. I could not deal with kids, and going from previous patterns there was also a likelihood that they would ask me to babysit. Even worse.

"Cool, maybe I can show them stuff I caught from last night," I said.

I know I just fired off a rant about seeing the kids, but please understand I did not mind occasional visits. When I was working on something, however, I wanted more alone time. I figured since I didn't work as a babysitter

and didn't have any children of my own, this would be alright. But the timing was never a supporter.

"Maybe. And also you can stay in the other bedroom if you would like," said my grandmother.

Right now I did not care who was coming by, I just wanted to catch some sleep. My grandmother had offered me one of the more comfortable rooms in the house to stay in for the night, which I gladly, yet almost subconsciously, accepted. That bed was definitely comfortable.

PROOF

Chapter 5
Troubled Legacies

Morning.

The sounds of birds singing outside around the bird feeders eased a morning recovery from a long night. Sunlight reached through the folds of the curtains on a dust-covered window and leaped into my eyes to ready me for the day. I arose from the bed arched over to allow my senses to return. First breaths of the morning slowly restarting all functions to my brain, and for just a few moments I feel nothing. Slowly the world collects itself within my eyes. The realization came forward about what time it was when the smell of pizza and the yells of small children filled the house. They're here.

I reached for the knob on the door and twisted. The clicks of an old door knob alarmed the dogs sending four dachshunds and a shi-tzu to my feet. I knelt over to greet them. From the tops of my eyes, I noticed four youthful faces staring at me from a blue tiled kitchen counter. Two boys and two girls.

"Morning guys," I said faking a smile through the slumber.

“Morning Koda, how was the ghost hunt last night?” asked my sister.

My sister, Barbara, was a blond nine years old with glasses possessing thicker lenses than the largest of telescopes known. The stereotypes placed on blonds were not appropriate but girls like my sister didn't help. She often was clueless to what had happened to her on a day-to-day basis. But regardless of the circumstances, she was my sister and I had to put up with her.

"It was good, lots of weird stuff happened," I said.

My sister had the mentality of a 3rd grader so I knew she wouldn't be

able to understand a lot of the specifics of what I do. All she knew was that I talked to ghosts. The way she viewed my nightly activities was better for her in the long run since she was unaware that there was always the subtle chance of a ghost hunt turning into a showdown between a vigilante and an undiscovered criminal.

"So can we see the stuff you caught?" asked one of my cousins. I had grown up with my aunt's two oldest boys, my cousins were almost like my brothers. Because my aunt practically diapered her oldest, I took her youngest boy, Evan, under my wing so he wouldn't turn into a neurotic basket case like his brother, Curtis.

"Ah... give me a chance to look through it first, okay kiddo?" I said.

"Okay," he said.

My grandmother held out a plate with a few slices of a meat lover's pizza.

"Here you go Dakota," she said.

I grabbed the plate and found a spot on a nearby couch. Next to the kitchen was a small area arranged like a living room for the younger ones in the family. It was a simple hangout so the kids would have something to do while visiting. I have always found comfort here, a place that I could just relax and think over everything that would happen between each weekly visit when I still lived with my mother.

The taste of the pizza was nearly refreshing. The sausage and pepperoni slowly awakening my organs like the gears of a factory. I was slowly warming up to match the day. My senses had been slowed due to a mind that was half asleep, now gaining speed thanks to appropriate timing. I glanced over at a clock on the wall to check the time. The clock read a few minutes before noon. At least I got my ten hours of sleep.

A movie was playing on a small flat screen, hanging above the kitchen doorway, that nearly hypnotized the kids. We all had the nasty habit of glancing toward any screen that was turned on regardless of whatever was on. In some senses, it gave our parents an extra babysitter, but in so many others it became our downfall. My sister and I were better about snapping our focus into anything that was needed, but my cousins not so much. One could slaughter their friends right before their own eyes, yet they wouldn't budge if their favorite cartoon was on. Their mother never helped the situation, she was the type to try to execute anyone that yelled at her kids, even when the shouts could have been nothing more than warnings to dangers that could soon manifest.

When my plate had been cleared I set it on the floor to let the dogs clean whatever residue was left. For these dogs, all it took was the weakest of smell to trigger a feeding frenzy. I walked over the dogs as their tongues would push the plate away as they tried to clean it. Eventually, the smallest of the pack placed his paw on the plate to hold it in place.

I stood next to the stools and glanced over to the movie to see what the

kids were watching. "Why in the hell are you guys watching this?" I asked.

The movie was a paranormal romance flick that nearly drove teenage girls with undeveloped minds into a raging tsunami. I wouldn't mind the movie so much if they didn't portray the girlfriend as such a wimp. Even if she was a mere prophet at least give her something to fight with if she needed to! Not only that but the boyfriend was usually a deadbeat.

"Because it's awesome," Curtis whined. Curtis, like I said before, was a neurotic basket case because of his mother. All he would ever do, without being forced, would sit on the couch and watch TV. I am not against having a day just to feel lazy, but come on, at least do something with your life while you're still young.

"Of course you would think it is Curtis, you're too chicken shit to even get off your ass," I said. He curled up his nose and growled as his mother marched into the room.

"Why in the hell are you yelling at him?" she screamed. I looked over to Curtis who possessed a giant grin seeing his blind momma lion come to his rescue. This was a dance I was all too familiar with at the time, but here there is an adjustment in my favor.

"I wasn't yelling," I said.

"Bull shit! Yes, you were!"

"No, I was simply telling your son that he needs to get outside more."

"He fucking doesn't! He is fine the way he is!"

"When a child doesn't want to do anything besides sit and watch T.V. all day, there is an issue."

"Well, all you do is sit around and play on the computer!"

"At least there is good money behind what I do!"

Like a stubborn teenage girl, she curled her nose and left the room. Curtis almost mimed the motion but stayed in his seat to avoid missing out on any part of the movie. I shook my head in disbelief and walked over to the dog-licked plate. As I leaned over I could hear my aunt continuing to complain about me to my grandfather. I hurried the plate over to the kitchen sink and rushed to the living room to listen in.

"But Dad," wailed my aunt.

"Enough is enough. When you start fighting with kids you have already lost, how many times do I have to tell you that?" said my grandfather. Pretty pathetic that a guy in his fifties still has to hear his grown daughters whine like teenagers.

"Hey Grandpa," I said with a gentle wave.

"Hey, D.T. how did last night go?" he asked. My grandfather had a nickname for myself and my cousin Curtis that would consist of the initials of our first and middle names, mostly because we were his two oldest grandkids

and our middle names were both Taylor (so given that my last name is Frandsen I bet some of you may realize how confused I was when kids would start using the texting acronym DTF at school).

"Actually it was quite interesting. I got ran out about two hours in," I answered.

"Did something scare you that bad?"

"Not really. I was screamed at from the get-go but later on, I was chasing a shadow out of the building."

"Really, do you have any idea who it was?"

"Somebody who was getting off work."

"How do you figure?"

"Cause the shadow literally said, 'Hey boss I'm heading home,' and got out of the snowplow."

"Really? Did you manage to get that on film?"

"I am not sure. After I got back I just crashed on the bed."

"That good of a night?"

"Heck yeah. One hell of a start to the job."

"Well, I am glad I was able to help you."

"Thank you for that by the way."

"You're welcome kiddo."

"I will be sure to get you the results in at least a couple weeks."

"Take your time with it. I don't want you missing out on anything."

"I know, but to keep up with the teams already in the area that is my goal."

"Are you sure that you want to do that? You are just starting out."

"Since I am one of the youngest people in the field I almost need to. I know this is just a hobby, but I need to make things look good just in case it goes somewhere."

"I see. Looks like you have it all under control."

"So far but, soon, there may be an addition to the crew."

"Oh really? Is she cute?"

"Yes."

"Well, that is all that matters."

"Exactly. Anyway, I am gonna grab my laptop and get started on evidence review. There are too many distractions to look through my DVR and audio but I can get started on pictures."

"Good luck. Let me know if you see anything."

"I will."

My very first official investigation brought another spell of beginner's luck that night. An addictive fragrance that pushed one to godlike potentials. Everything that happened, from the screams of deceased old hags to a young child that attempted to chainsaw me, the chances of none of it getting caught on camera was nearly impossible. My assumptions only took into consideration the events I personally witnessed, but what my equipment saw could tell an entirely different story. In more ways than one situation like these often rendered paranormal research into pseudoscience, it was difficult to get any results to repeat themselves. It isn't much of a surprise though, technically the things I search for are mostly acknowledged as the makings of stories.

Anyone who studied psychology at any level would likely recognize these situations more than the average person since it literally took someone realizing that there are several physical effects that associate with changes in mood for it to become a legitimate field. It was only a matter of time before something similar were to happen in my field of research. In fact in some circles, that push was already happening.

I slowly walked through the hallway back into the kitchen. The kids were still frozen to the screen as I walked by, clueless of my presence until I was out the door. The Murtaugh countryside scent filled the air that seemed to almost dance on the wings of the birds and butterflies. I stopped on a wooden deck that I helped my grandfather build to study the mountains that almost looked like drawings from this distance. The clears skies made them appear just as blue as the sunny day. Rain clouds slid through each lip giving the mountains a sweet countryside kiss. A storm was approaching, and around these parts, it multiplied in intensity because of the nearby lake. Rainfall often began as light tears of a new child and would shift into waterfalls capable carving the sharpest of diamonds in a matter of moments.

I needed to hurry and get my computer before the storm hit. Anyone with common sense should know that water and electronics don't mix. My gear was safe inside my car, from both rain and earthquakes of childhood carelessness, but I needed to give into risk just for now so I could get started on evidence review.

The deck was enclosed with a four-foot wood railing my grandfather and I put in so the dogs could have access to fresh air when work needed to be done in the yard. On each side of the railing, an opening was made for a gate, one to the yard the other to the driveway. The gate towards the driveway was hard to open because of a slight dip in the mountain landscape it was built on.

In Idaho, there was no such thing as flat ground, even flooring inside houses had a slight tilt once the place had enough time to conform to the ground. You would think that construction crews got better at adjusting the land to fit their needs, but ninety percent of the crews around here had an IQ that matched eighth graders and they constantly were behind schedule. One of the ways money is treated like toilet paper in this country, constantly trying to wipe up the

shit that is in power.

The gravel in the driveway gave way under my foot with each step. About fifteen feet into the driveway the ground began to harden, about right next to my car. I grabbed the handle on the driver's side door and opened up to reveal a worn leather seat with a black tactical vest blending in the fabric. I reached into the pockets to grab my digital and night vision camera to get a hold of their SD memory cards once I was inside. Just under the steering wheel, a little towards the left was a latch that popped open the trunk. A large thunk sounded off as the trunk sprung open uncovering my equipment.

On top of a black mass of bags was my computer bag. Inside a black satchel-like bag was my window to the rest of a world I built myself. With it, over the next couple weeks, I was to build more to the world with its first drops of life-force finally spread through its winds. Once the soft handle of the bag was in my hand and to my side I closed the trunk. As I turned back I saw my sister, cousin, mother, aunt, and grandmother walking out of the house. "Hey Dakota, can you watch the boys while we go out shopping, thanks," shouted my aunt.

'You fucking bitch,' I thought to myself. That woman was leaving two needy brats with a man that didn't need kids around him 24/7 and a kid trying to build his own world. The reason I went out on my own was that I was sick of babysitting kids that were not mine. I did not adopt them, nobody was injured, nobody in the military, I was not paid to watch them, they were just dropped at my feet. I would have just jumped in my car and bolted if the only other babysitter available wasn't my grandfather.

"Fine," I said trying to hold back the frustration. It was almost pointless, like shoving a piece of paper in fresh lava and expecting it to stop an eruption. But with my aunt, sometimes, you might as well burn the school. I hurried back into the house before my knucklehead cousins decided to wild since their mother was finally gone. Sure enough, they started swinging the moment I hit the screen door.

"Would you two knock it off?!" I screamed. They both froze in fear until Curtis gained enough moxie to smack his brother on the back of the head.

"You little punk," I whispered. I don't like to hit kids, but Curtis thought he had a shield near because his mother kept a diaper on him for twelve years, he needed a reality check. I kneeled closer Curtis, placing my eyes just three inches from his.

"You like to start swinging? That is okay," I whispered, "But listen here."

I latched onto his chin to force his full attention. Pulling his skin forward to force a fish face, his saliva began to brew in his efforts to speak.

"Shut up and listen," I said while slowly squeezing. Tears began to form, clouding his glasses that sat so close to his eyes.

"You are much bigger than your brother, if you keep this up you could

hurt him so bad that his death would be on your head. I don't care if he is being an asshole and tormenting you unless he is beating on your sister or anyone else, I don't want to see or hear about you hurting him, do you understand?" I asked him.

Curtis couldn't talk, and by the look in his eyes I could tell that he wasn't going to, so I looked over to his brother. "Evan, the same goes to you. Do you understand?" I asked him. Evan nodded.

"Good."

I let go of Curtis so he could adjust his lower jaw back into place and moved my hand to his shoulder. I placed my open hand on the opposite shoulder of Evan's, boxing them in with my arms.

"Do you guys remember what Grandpa and I told you better be happening if you get in a fight?" I asked them. They shook their heads no.

"We told you that if you ever get in a fight; you better be defending yourself, defending someone who is in need, or defending something that is important. That way you are less likely to get in serious trouble, right?" I asked them.

"Yeah," answered Evan with a tone of worry.

"Good. Now Curtis, if your brother starts throwing punches here, is what you do."

I grabbed Evan's arm and twisted it behind his back while using my other arm to lift him up. "Block his shots, tie him up, then squeeze!" I yelled as I squeezed his bone-thin body.

Evan tried to shout for help but my arm was crushing his lungs, a trick I always used to calm fighting boys. His thoughts of retaliating were weakened from lack of oxygen, he couldn't do anything even if he wanted.

"Koda, please. Let... go," he struggled. I dropped him on his feet to let him recover. He leaned forward to catch his breath while his brother began laughing. Evan then rotated his head like an owl to face his brother with squinted eyes.

“Now Evan, if your brother is the one causing problems, unplug the TV and run like heck,” I said. Evan held his lips together as he laughed, making him sound like a dolphin with a sore throat. Curtis crunched his face in anger in response to a truth that his mother also tried to diaper.

I know that my actions may be misconstrued as overkill or just plain abusive. But in all honesty, it was for the best. My cousins' father was a bipolar maniac, and I seemed to be the only one that knew certain disorders could pass onto the children through genetic dispositions. All of the signs were present, hinting at the chance of a major disaster if they ever snapped. If they were to snap, I wanted to be sure that the first person they went after was someone that could snap them out of the rage but also knew why they attacked in the first place. So far I was the only person that was able to do so, perhaps the only one

that cared enough.

My family ignored it as child's play, but the wrong actions in the youth can escalate into adulthood if not stopped. They needed to be monitored, otherwise, their actions would have gotten them killed. No matter, I needed to focus on other things at that moment.

I walked back into the spare bedroom that I was granted for my visit and shut the door behind me. The sound of the door shutting alerted the dogs, lead by a small brown and black dachshund that served as the scout of the pack. Ironically, that dog was a rescue that was supposed to not bark, I guess things change when the abuse is taken away. Maybe my cousins will turn out alright, but again not my problem. I placed my loaded computer bag on sheets of the bed that sank under the weight. The softness of the bed conforms to the shape of the bag, leaving a dent in the sheets. As the laptop was removed the shape began to return to the sheets until I sat, further stretching its boundaries.

The laptop cover screeched with the dust covering the hinges, knowing that town I was in there was probably the dead cells of at least thirty people. Almost made it seem like the Dead's last resort to keeping their secrets hidden in the shadows by pulling on the one thing that gave the living a window into their worlds. Thankfully earthbound spirits of pure or neutral orientation lacked strength unless angered, only capable of lifting objects that weigh about three pounds, otherwise, this may have been much more difficult than a quick wipe with the moist rag.

I removed the memory cards from both of the cameras and placed the emptied units on a nearby desk the stood at the very edge of the bed. The first step was inserting the card from the normal digital camera, I waited for the indication tone to sound when my computer finally recognized the data. The task was to search through the photos just to see if anything abnormal was captured.

The parts that were difficult about this part of the job was distinguishing between tricks of the mind and actual anomalies in the photographs. It is easy to call a face in the mirror a spirit to the untrained eye when it could simply be light reflecting off of streaks from the last time it was cleaned. Immediately I could notice that very effect in various photos I had taken the night, immediately disqualifying them from the roster. For the untrained or the newly awoken to the paranormal field, an easier way to tell if a face in the mirror is a natural trick of the light is to check to see if the same image appears in multiple photos, especially if they are all taken with slightly different angles. If you have any background in photography you should be able to verify this more than anyone else. Camera and lighting angles could turn an innocent baby into a giant with a few easy maneuvers. When it came to tricks of the light on mirrors anything could turn the image of a demon into a popular celebrity if the photographer was not careful.

Another trick I needed to watch out for was the reflections of the many street signs that seemed to be tossed aside. I could never figure out how but

when the flash of the camera would reflect from the sign, something about how it was made gave the appearance of strange bars of light that seemed to float in the air. The sign itself was shining as it would if the headlights of a passing vehicle were upon it. I always wondered how they were manufactured so that the reflection wouldn't blind the drivers, but with some thought, it was probably some anti-glare residue that street signs are coated in. Useful to the driver, a pain for the skilled ghost hunter that knew differently.

Other than dancing lights the main thing I was searching for the shadows that danced around me all night. These types of figures were easy to spot since the flash of the camera reacted to them as it would have if it were living people it was trying to blind. It would also no affect their appearance, so anytime a shadow was out of place or dead center in the photo, without any manipulations, it was definitely something supernatural. The same followed when looking through night vision equipment, but infrared lighting easily passed through the black material, often times the shadow figures themselves were rendered invisible. But the interesting twist was that the shadow figure's own shadow could be seen. Yes, you heard that correctly, shadow figures can also cast shadows. Yet they could easily walk right through you if they pleased.

But to my disappointment, the camera did not register anything anomalous that I wasn't able to “debunk,” as the field experts would say. I never liked the term debunking, simply because getting evidence was not “bunking.” This wasn't sharing a room with a sibling, this was an investigation. But out of better terms, or by habit because of how I learned about the job, I used it.

So moving on I removed the card from my digital camera and replaced it with the one from my night vision camera. The tone on my computer sounded off for the departure and the arrival of the data on each card. Opening the file, my laptop counted seven large video files organized by times the files were created. Based on my own experiences from that night I knew that every one of those files had something that was not supposed to be there, something that would prove my stories.

I began with the first video on the list, taken just shortly after I was screamed at by an old woman. In the frame, it was hard to make out what was all in the shot due to the weak infrared lighting that came from the camera. With an adjustment of the pupils, my eyes began to make out generic shapes on the side of the snowplow that occupied the space. Minutes passed and the only activity I noticed was the LEDs fading in and out, reducing the sight of the camera. More time passed until something finally appeared. In the video, I began to speak. “Maybe show yourself to the little video camera I have going right now,” I shouted in the video. Almost simultaneously a white object jolted into the frame for a brief second then disappeared. Quickly pause the video as soon as I noticed the figure, I noted the time stamp that read, “00:10:24.45.”

With the results in hand, I needed to open a video editing software in order to separate this finding from the rest of the video. Once opened I inserted the time stamp that held the figure into the software and set it back about ten seconds. In the reveal, each individual finding from the videos would last an

average of twenty seconds, give or take how long it stayed in the frame, with a set amount of time that lead up to any manifestations. With the video I would multiply the clip at least thrice, using different effects to help bring out the appearance of the anomaly, usually slowing its duration and changing the brightness of the shot.

Once edited more features became noticeable on the figure. It strongly resembled a male figure, just slightly taller than the fridge since it was only the top part of the face that could be seen. I moved my mouse to the options bar at the top of the screen and rendered the clip into a separate file. Now I needed to follow-up with the rest of the video. Perhaps as a blessing for my first night, my wait was not long until something else came along, the smoker's cough. It sounded different than I remembered, much lower in pitch, and sounding like it came from a male subject. It looked like Hector was still among the world of the living after all.

Within a thirty-minute time frame, only four major anomalies were captured in the first video, out of the two and a half hours on the SD card. Two of which were detailed faces jumping in and out of the frame and random occasions, now collected as clips readied to be cut into the final reveal. But before I could move forward, the sounds of tiny paws clicking against the hardwood gave away the notion of visitors. The girls had returned.

Outside the room, I could hear the shuffle of plastic grocery bags being hauled into the kitchen. The motion of the bags strangling the groceries echoed, revealing their contents. Inside held at least two weeks worth of groceries. Chips, loafs of bread, juice powders, seasonings for dinners, typical household items that filled cupboard space for the daily use. The sound of them all reminded me of low supplies back home. I needed to go shopping. I left the bedroom and met with everyone in the kitchen.

“So Dakota are you going to stick around? We were thinking of roasting marshmallows tonight,” asked my grandmother.

“No, actually I am going to head back home. I am going to need some more horsepower than what is available here to do what I need to do,” I answered.

“Alright. Have fun.”

My family often sounded sarcastic when I talked about my accomplishments, so often I would try to keep quiet about them. However, my own excitement for the events would dictate opposite action, inevitably leading to the same results each time. I don't know why I stuck around, I always felt that something was going to happen that I was needed for. The vibrations I felt were screaming at me something was wrong were weak at the time, so I knew it was going to be a while.

My luggage was light so packaging up to leave took minimal timing. I did not want to stick around much longer than I needed to before trouble started to brew once again. “Dakota, why the fuck did you hit Curtis?” screamed my aunt. Too late.

"You expect me to watch over your brats that you won't control, what am I supposed to do when they start smacking each other?" I answered.

"How about letting them be boys?"

"How the hell am I supposed to do that when you won't let them outside?"

My aunt stormed into view, almost too fake reinforcements in order to confront me. Her face was blood red, she was about to blow a gasket.

"And maybe you should stop putting a diaper on Curtis, he is in middle school and would fully capable of handling himself if you would let him," I added. From the corner of my eye, I saw the look on my grandfather's face. It held a look of subtle agreements, one that needed to hide from his daughter. He had tried to tell her the same thing several times in the past, but she would never listen. "I will be leaving now."

With my computer bag in hand, I walked through the kitchen and out the back door. From behind me, I could hear the little ones trying to say goodbye, but their messages were silenced by my aunt until her youngest ran up behind me. I was stopped at the screen door when I felt a tiny hand pulling on my pant leg. I turned to see my four-year old cousin with tears beginning to form in her eyes.

"Why don't you come outside with me for a second?" I asked her.

She nodded her head, "yes" and followed me outside to a green swing seat that was on the deck. It was a bench that hung from a metal canopy-like arrangement that could fold into a bed with a few adjustments. Often times the little ones and I would relax on it during a warm summer day just to get some fresh air, whether we were going through a stressful situation or just needed some time alone, this is where you would often find us. And it was here that the sight of a little girl breaking the heart of a giant would take place.

"Why do you fight with my mom?" she asked.

"It's hard to explain Monica," I answered.

"Why?" she asked.

While trying to think of an answer she would understand, I lifted her up and set her on my lap. Monica, much like myself, was tall for her age which she would learn later in life was a bit of a disadvantage. She was going to have to grow up a bit faster than most kids, just to compensate for what she was going to have to lose, which for the youngest child was unfair. Yet when she got older she would never realize that the term unfairly would be blessed with her brothers, which was a frightening thought. My grandfather and I were the closest that she ever really knew as father figures in her life. As for Curtis, Evan, and Monica, our grandpa was all we had for a father figure. Now that he was battling cancer, we all depended on each other so that he could focus on simply getting better. But her mother's actions often interfered by suddenly dropping three needy kids without notice. Monica needed moments like this in her life, because

I feared that soon it would be taken from her. “Because sometimes people need to fight when bad things happen,” I said, trying to answer her.

“But my teacher said that fighting is bad,” she replied.

“Well your teacher is right, but fighting sometimes causes good things to happen.”

“How?”

“You know how sometimes your brother's get into fights, but after they are done they act like it never happened?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, the reason they do that is that fighting is sometimes the only thing that makes bad things go away.”

“Really? So what is bad about my mom?”

I wanted to answer Monica, but in truth, the answer was complex, much more than the mind of a four-year old could understand. The poor child was allergic to nearly every known food item and more, on top of being an asthmatic, so her mother tried to keep her quarantined inside regardless of what she was advised to do.

Both doctors and family alike tried to get my aunt to understand that in order to get rid of some of the allergies, Monica needed to be exposed, then after extensive monitoring, her doctor would eventually eliminate a majority of the problem. Yet we might as well have pried every tooth out of her mouth, cause it took a lot in order to get what was needed to be done.

After a second or two something clicked inside my mind that would help Monica understand. “You know how you are allergic to a lot of things, so your mom doesn't let you do a lot?” I asked her.

“Yeah,” she replied with a hint of curiosity.

“Well, there is actually a way to get rid of some of those allergies.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, and can you guess what it is?”

“My mom has to let me do that stuff?” she guessed with an evil grin on her face.

“You got it.”

Monica was actually very smart for her age. I often guessed that some of her brains were hidden by the thick curls that rested on her head. She was a child of mixed races, and her hair was some of the curliest I have seen. Tiny loops that could trap an entire cargo plane if she wasn't careful. Everyone had to be careful when they would rub her head since her hair liked to grab onto anything that intruded. Don't let the cuteness fool you, her hair also held in temper and just plain evil. But something about that little girl always managed to fool me. “Anyway, I got to go. Be good okay?” I told her. Before she answered

she lunged forward and hugged me around the neck.

"I love you, Koda," she said.

"I love you too kiddo," I answered.

I gave Monica one last squeeze before setting her down. She knew I had to go, but something about her gave me the feeling that she was worried. Either something she heard while at preschool or something her mother told her that she didn't quite understand made her upset every time I would leave. Needless to say, it bothered me, not because of what she was told, but because it distorted a promise I made her a long time ago. The promise? It was to always be there for her no matter what happened. A promise I made to my brothers and sisters, that I was unable to keep.

What is it about the sadness that makes the hands of time push back its own sand? What was going on that made space itself seem to grow? Was it the lenses inside a teardrop that did this? It seemed like a very mysterious phenomenon indeed.

As I walked over to my car, these blurs took over me, almost as if I were in a drunken trance. I could still see everything, but every acted as if it couldn't see me. It felt like something was trying to remove me from this realm. The sounds around me began to fade as well. I feared for what could have been happening to me. So to avoid crashing down I hurried into my car, sliding my computer bag into the floorboard just under the glove box on the passenger side and tried to rest before I drove away. I laid my head back on the seat to try to relax. Next, to me, where my vest sat, I felt a little girl near me.

"Daddy? What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing, Baby Girl," I answered holding back tears.

"Is it about Monica?" she asked.

"No, I am just worried that something really bad is going to happen really soon that is going to hurt a lot of people."

"I know. Is there anything I could do to make you feel better?"

I looked over to the passenger seat to look my little girl in the eye. There was something that she could do to get my mind off of it all. "Could you tell me who your mommy is?" I asked her.

She smiled, "You already found her. She will let you know when she is ready."

I secretly hoped for a more specific answer, but it was enough of a pleasant start. "Really? Does she know too?" I asked, so I could prepare.

"She knows just as much as you do Daddy. They won't let me tell you anything else yet."

"Who?"

"Mommy's friend."

Olivia looked away as if something caught her attention. “She is calling me,” she said.

“Wait, are you in trouble?” I asked worried about the safety of my daughter.

“Don't worry Daddy. I'll be back in a little bit.”

I tried to think of more to say, but Olivia had disappeared once again before I could do so.

“The things I deal with for the women in my life,” I whispered.

After my daughter had faded into the divide once again I started up the car and drove away. Obviously, my presence was a bother, and I hate to take up more time than what was needed. The only reason I stayed was to help my grandfather with the kids, now that their so-called mothers have returned I was no longer needed. Perhaps on the way home, I would run into someone that would not take my presence for granted.

The canyon always had a poetic view during any given afternoon in the spring. Something about that time of day always made it feel like a backward trip through time. The sagebrush, occasional wildlife, the distant sounds of fish surfacing in the river below, all of it whispered songs that felt like the stories grandparents would tell their kin. Often times I wondered if this was how it felt back when there was no technology to compromise the personal connections between strangers, back when everybody knew their neighbors. Sometimes this was how I envisioned how a post-apocalyptic world would be seen once humanity was somehow removed from the ranks, and I was the lone survivor. Murtaugh served as an unsung reminder to both these notions. A place time forgot, and a place nature remained. Regardless of what the people residing there believed, it would not be hard to wipe the town clean from existence. All it would take was the schools getting destroyed.

I was reminded of these images nearly every time I would visit. Many would probably try to imagine other fates for the town, but given my violent history there, what I would see would also be my hopes. The people there tried to beat on me like a punching bag, they even tried pelting me with random rocks from the playground. They tried to hurt me, but would only be fascinated by the face the rocks would just bounce right off of my body.

Twenty minutes passed until I was back in town. Amour Trahison Perte, the hell hole in which I lived, was much like Oublé in the sense of how people treated one another. Here people hated everybody and believed the first thought to come to mind was the truth. Nobody ever bothered to dig into the problem, they all just assumed the worst was on the surface. The school district took this same code into their methods of punishment, along with a few hints of favoritism to those who gave the school monetary benefit. Soon they would earn a proper reward for their negligence. My only fear for these schools is that somebody I cared about was going to be in the line of fire.

On the outskirts of town, about three miles from my place during road

construction was a one-stop supermarket that I had a member's card for. While living by myself, these cards became useful to save a few bucks. I made a better living than most people in the state, but I tried to keep enough funds stocked up just in case of emergency. Call me paranoid but knowing my family's medical history and common circumstances of bad luck, I did the right thing. The worst tends to happen when people don't wire their own safety net, just to cover their ass in case they trip.

The parking lot was nearly full, barely any spots available near the door. I guess one can attribute it to the growing laziness in this country. I didn't care about parking toward the far back of the lot. Once I found a spot parked closest to the exit and parked my car, I jumped out in order to stretch my legs. The car I had didn't satisfy the legroom of a growing oversized teenager, which became obvious once my size started to shift on a daily basis and my knees started to come higher than the dashboard in rushed situations. I was looking into getting a truck sometime soon, but the money became a problem.

I had what I needed, don't get me wrong, but something kept telling me I should wait. Thankfully, my mother had tried to cram me in several, and I mean several, tight spots when I was growing up so adjusting myself wasn't an issue on most days.

When I locked my car and faced the store I noticed a familiar sight, a girl with long black hair walking next to who appeared to be her mother. My thoughts about her identity might have seemed obvious at the time, but from the angle, I spotted her, it was hard to tell if they were correct. I needed to get closer, so I hurried into the store while trying to avoid getting hit by a car. Somehow, despite my height, it was a difficult task that day.

I walked through the automatic sliding doors of the store to immediately scan the visible area. I looked at the various items in sight hoping to see her, but with no results. But with hopes that she was still in the store, I grabbed a cart to begin grocery shopping. In my mind, I kept a list of everything I was needing, but just in case I would walk around through the entire store just to be sure.

I walked over to a hallway in the store that carts were hidden. A woman struggling with both a hyperactive little boy and a latched cart stood in the way. As I moved closer to the mother and son I started to hear something out of place, a heartbeat that didn't match the rest. It was a slow beat, almost as if it was fresh. While moving closer to the woman the solo heartbeat grew stronger. It was close but seemingly had no source. The woman continued to struggle with the cart as the child grew louder. “Would you like some help with that?” I asked.

“Yes, please! Thank you,” said the relieved woman.

I placed both of my hands on the conjoined carts and jerked them apart. A deformity in the plastic had caused a bulge in the cart that gripped others of its kind. “There you go,” I said passing the cart along.

“Thank you again,” she said.

A strand of hair had danced on her face during the struggle that she gently moved back over her head revealing a tired face. She was a good-looking blonde gal, but her kid dragged her out almost like a rag doll. The young man was hidden away behind his mother's leg.

“Too bad more guys aren't like you,” she said glancing over to a nearby cart pusher.

“Well, I try to be one of the better ones,” I said with a smile. The woman blushed as she walked away. The boy, now with his fingers wrapped in between the gaps of the shopping cart, watched me closely as they moved farther away. Then I noticed the camouflage patterns on his clothes which gave me an idea on what to do to help his mom out. “You keep your mother safe, got it, soldier?” I said. The boy giggled then jumped when his mother suddenly stopped and placed her hand on her stomach.

“Are you okay mom?” asked the boy.

“Yeah I am okay, your sister keeps kicking me though,” answered his mother.

The mother shook her head and continued walking as best as she could. The conversation between her and her son slowly faded, but I had heard enough to understand the situation. Once again my hidden abilities surfaced.

One of the many tricks I have used since I was a small child was a psychic ultrasound. For some reason whenever I am near a pregnant woman, I start to hear the heartbeat of her unborn child. Then within fractions of a second, I actually begin to see the child as you would on the newer four-dimensional ultrasounds. I hardly ever revealed that I could do this simply out of fear of execution.

I grabbed the cart that was stuck to the original one and began moving through the aisles. The aisles were piled with several parents trying to squeeze in groceries around hyper children. Frustration danced liked the aromas of cheap candles, crushing its partner's feet with every sway making simply walking around to the store difficult. I tried to move through, but about every third row I ended up kissing carts. Finally, in the frozen aisles, I found what I had been looking for in the entire store, the girl with long black hair. She had been trying to jump to get a better reach for a box of mini corn dogs on the top shelf that her fingers barely touched the edge of. I pushed my cart over to the far opposite aisle, remarkably the only one that was clear in the store and sneaked up behind her. “Here, let me get that for you,” I said.

“Oh, thank you,” she said backing away a few feet. I reached for the box that she had tried to reached for and brought it down to her level. As I handed her the box, her eyes lit up. “Dakota!” she squealed.

“Surprise! I happened to be passing through and thought you could have used a little help,” I said with a slight grin.

“I am glad that you did. When I couldn't reach it I start thinking of you,” said Shandra with a shade of red blooming on her face.

"I hope that is a good thing."

"It is," she giggled. She then peered around me to see a cart full of various items. "Is that your cart?" she asked.

"Yeah, I am just grabbing some stuff for my house."

"Oh really? Where are your parents?"

I wasn't sure how to answer the question because of how many levels in complexity it resided in. So I just brought up the simplest form of the truth I could think of. "I, uh, actually live by myself," I answered. By the look on Shandra's face, I could tell she heard the worry in my voice.

"Really? Where do you live?"

"I actually live in the large gray house on Eastlake, the one across from the cemetery."

"Oh yeah, I have seen you around there before. But how can you afford to live there by yourself? It's a pretty shitty economy and hardly anybody can hold together their own life."

"Well, I helped with a few projects in areas above what the recession is affecting."

"You're lucky. Maybe I can come by sometime?"

"Sure, I got no problem with it. I have plenty of room."

"Cool."

From around the far corner, near the front of the store, an older woman that vaguely resembled Shandra appeared. "Shandra I got the... who is this?" she asked.

"Oh hey, mom. This is my friend Dakota, the one I told you about from school," Shandra answered.

"Oh yeah, you weren't kidding. He is huge."

I reached out my hand to properly greet Shandra's mother. "It's nice to meet you," I said.

"Likewise Mr. Frandsen. And please call me Ramona," she said reaching out to my hand. The moment friction buzzed our palms something changed in Ramona's eyes shifting her glare from kind mother to startled momma bear. She wrapped her fingers around my hand and shook like she would any other person, but the muscles in her hand were tighter than an average greeting. This woman was mad about something. She tilted her head slightly to the side and said, "Shandra please head back over to the produce, I think I forgot the tomatoes for salad tonight."

"But mom," Shandra gently cried.

"Just go do it," forced her mother.

Shandra hesitated to complete her mother's orders until I gave a slight

nod letting her know I was alright. In truth, I was a little nervous, but I have stared into the eyes of the devil before. Ramona fixed her eyes on mine as if ready to slice me open as she slowly tightened her grip. “Alright big boy, what exactly are you planning on doing with my daughter?” she asked through her teeth.

It was obvious that she had used this technique on guys that were tempted by her daughter in the past. The look in her eyes and lack of hesitance said enough for me to understand. It also gave me a way to break through the barriers. “For right now I am just trying to be a friend,” I answered.

“Sure, that is what they all say. I cannot let my little girl be with some scumbag, after all, she has been through. What makes you different?” she asked.

After I had answered she tightened her grip as a method of public interrogation. She was expecting me to break, but she was unaware of the times I held a woman's hand during childbirth during more incidents of unlucky timing. It was a miracle that my hand didn't burst then, so there was nothing she could do to make it do so now.

“I am one of the oldest of thirty-nine children, which after endless hours of babysitting gave me enough motivation to avoid having sex as much as possible,” I replied. My answer was more than her mind could handle, but regardless of what she thought it was the truth, which served as the crowbar, I needed to pry my hand free of Ramona.

“Really? How the heck did that happen?” she asked.

“In short, too many people knocking on the neighbor's door late at night. Trust me I just barely found out about thirty-two of them, with very good odds that even more are out there.”

“Wow. How do I know that you're not lying?”

“Because just before I met your daughter, I met my long-lost sister that is just two months younger than me. Even though I haven't told a lot of people, Shandra knows who she is, but she doesn't know the full story.”

“Oh.”

Ramona has eased her stature once she realized I had other things on my mind that didn't involve sleeping with every girl in sight. I could have ended it here, but there were two more tricks up my sleeve for the grand finale. “And while I still have your attention there is another thing you should know about me,” I said lighting the first fuse to the fireworks.

“What is that?” she asked with a tone of near guilt.

“I know several cops in the area that I have helped with on several occasions. If something were to happen to your daughter I could make that I will, personally make sure they used everything to find her and put down the sick bastards that hurt her, even if it means soaking my own hands in their blood just so I could carry her home. I know I just said I was just hoping to be friends with Shandra, but in all honesty, something about her makes me pray that

someday something much more would bring us together."

Ramona's eyes shifted again from anger to relief. I had passed her test. "I am going to hold you to that," she said.

"I wouldn't expect anything less," I told her. It was true, she was a single mother that worried about her teenage daughter. Knowing that I was tight with the police force, she knew I was probably one of the better guys her daughter decided to get with. Something in my voice let her know that I was being truthful to my promise. What she didn't know was how the police knew me, which I was asked to keep secret under the circumstances. Little did I know that during the finale, Shandra had been watching, listening in on words never spoken before. Once again from behind me she latched on holding me tighter than before.

"Thank you," she cried.

I turned to try to face her, but only managing to position myself like a father getting a long-awaited hug from his little girl. I glanced down to try to see her face, but my discovery turned for the worse. Underneath a black turtleneck, traces of a friction burn circled her throat. The markings were not consistent of a rope burn, but something much thicker. Shading in the marks resembled something close to a belt. Shandra was in danger. I reached into my pocket to grab a business card with my number on it.

"Here, take this," I told her.

She lifted her head and grabbed the card with her hand while asking, "What is it?"

"My card," I answered, "If you need help with anything, or just someone to talk to, don't be afraid to get a hold of me. Day or night, I will always answer."

The card was one of many I had made in order to promote my paranormal team. The design was a prototype I made from a website template that only mentioned my name, my website, and my number. It was my first thought to be careful about who I shared these with, just to avoid fraudulent calls.

But in this case, somebody needed my help. I could tell Shandra was in danger, she was just needing someone to reach out to her. If she was troubled, I knew to listen. If she was harmed, I knew a monster greater than the classic Jekyll and Hyde that could break her free. Shandra needed to see that, cause that mark around her neck was fresh and looked like it was actually done with several applications.

"Thank you," she said while tearing up. She needed to see somebody willing to fight for her at the drop of a dime. As she walked over to her mother I could hear the whispering noting it is best to hide the card. Both of them were in danger. My Shadow Hunter began to see the bruises faded in time, now revealed for the executioner. Somebody was deserving of a visit from hell hounds, but I needed to be sure. As Shandra and Ramona walked to the registers I walked

back over to my cart to do the same. Perhaps I could read more into the situation.

The store lacked self-check outs but held enough kind cashiers to talk to during the transactions. I skimmed through the open lanes and found a woman that resembled an old friend's grandmother. I entered her lane and started setting my groceries on the belt.

“Didn't you go to Jefferson Elementary?” she asked me.

My face was in shock that it was, in fact, the woman was the grandmother of my old friend Cherry, who I hadn't seen since the sixth grade.

“Hey Mrs. Rowan, long time no see!” I said with a chuckle.

“Oh my god, Dakota? I almost didn't recognize you!”

“Yeah, I guess I might have changed a bit since the last time you saw me.”

“No kidding, how tall are you now?”

“Uh, about six foot five last time I checked.”

“Already? I knew you were going to be big but damn!”

“Seems to be the word on the street. Anyway, how is Cherry doing?”

“Oh dear, you didn't hear,” she said with tears trying to form. I was officially worried about this reunion turning sour.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“She is in a coma. Did you hear about the large crash near McCall that was on the news about two months ago?”

“Yeah, it was caused by some seventeen-year old that only cared about the fact he could stick his tongue through his cheek after it all happened. I heard that the girl that was hit got flown over to the hospital in critical condition but they never released whether or not she made it. That was her?”

“It was, she was in horrible condition. She had lost both of her legs in the crash. The doctors are doing everything they can to make sure she makes it but they are starting to lose hope.”

“Oh my god.”

When the news had set their charges around my eardrums I walked away with my hand covering my forehead. Cherry was a very good friend of mine back in elementary school when I was bullied a lot by other kids because of my size. She had been bullied as well because she had hit puberty a lot earlier than other girls. Being a guy I didn't fully understand what she went through. But I did understand, perhaps a little too well, that the treatment she received was unfair. We both had matured at early ages both in physical and mental way, which turned us into outcasts. Because of everything that happened we became real close until she moved away when we were about the age of twelve.

From behind I could hear Mrs. Rowan, “She told me that you guys kept

in touch online."

By then I began to cry, and who could blame me? My old friend was a prisoner inside her own body and was likely to not come out. "Yeah, we made a promise to find a way to still be able to see each other the day she heard about the move," I said trying to hold back.

"I figured that out when she would start giggling nonstop after being on the computer. She looked forward to talking to you every day. To be honest because of everything I thought that someday you two would get married," she laughed.

I laughed at the images that appeared in my head when Cherry's grandmother told me her vision. "How did you come to that conclusion?" I asked trying to mask worry with old feelings.

"After one day when you two were about seven I accidentally caught Cherry acting out a wedding. When I asked her who the groom was, she giggled and said your name. Ever since then when she would come over to stay the night, I always heard her say the words, 'Dakota I love you,' in her sleep. I guess because of how often she would say it, I figured that someday her wish would come true," she said while ringing up my groceries.

When I heard what Mrs. Rowan recalled about Cherry, tears of sadness no longer flowed from my eyes, but rather tears of bliss. Knowing that I was the cause of her happiness I felt relieved about the pain she had been through in my absence.

"Hun, I know that you aren't religious, but can I ask you to please pray for her tonight? Maybe something from you will help her make it through."

Prayer, a method ridiculed by the masses which held miraculous power if done under generous decisions. Scientific measures were just barely realizing that prayer, and other spiritualistic methods actually had very powerful effects. Like the old woman had said before I am not exactly religious but even from me prayers could do some extraordinary things. "I will don't worry," I answered.

"Good. Your total is sixty-six dollars and sixty cents," she said.

"Great, thanks for the warning," I joked while sliding my prepaid debit card through the system.

"You aren't going to grab some gum to change it?" she asked in a confused tone.

"Nope, I just found out a friend of mine is in danger. That just lets me know I need to get ready to kick in some doors."

"Be careful, Dakota," said while handing me my receipt.

"Don't worry I am not the one hellfire is wanting to burn," I said while grabbing my cart now full of plastic grocery bags filled with various items and a tub of ice cream. The bag boy noticed that I was ready for a gunfight and tucked himself closer the register to avoid getting run over. A smart move on his part.

Anytime the number “666” would appear I immediately would take it as a warning for approaching misfortune from the cosmos. Whenever those particular number would appear something bad always followed, but often times the numbers come in the most ironic ways that go missed until some conspiracy theorist would notice the pattern. I myself was guilty of these thoughts, but all in good reason. For this occasion, I was aware of an approaching battle that was brewing not too far from where I was going.

Outside of the store, I watched Shandra and her mother hurry to load their groceries into their car. In the front seat was a large male figure with what looked like tattoos that nearly blended into the tinted windows. He was shouting to the top of his lungs. I walked closer, pretending I didn't remember where I had parked, so I could mask my efforts to get more information. Shandra noticed me in in the blast zone but pretended not to notice in order to protect herself. As I entered a five-foot radius around their vehicle and noticed a familiar snake tattoo that resembled what a local national guard branch would wear after getting deployed into war, I knew immediately there was no chance of this incident ending well.

I pulled out my cell phone and dialed “911” to call in a potential domestic disturbance to city dispatch. My car was positioned just far enough that the potential target would not be able to hear me, and extra insurance was in place since traffic was heavy and the sound of the motors would have masked my voice. “911 what is your emergency,” read off the dispatcher.

“Dispatch this is Dakota Frandsen, I need to report a possible domestic disturbance as well as possible assault on a minor that will quickly escalate soon,” I said trying to remain calm.

“Alright Dakota, I have your location. Can you tell me what is going on?”

“I will after I get you to run a plate for me.”

“Dakota I am not able to give you that information.”

“Listen! I am not looking for names I am just looking to see if we have a former national guardsman involved. My CI code seventy-nine, delta, bravo, Juliet, Romeo, twenty-four.”

“Alright I ran your name through, looks like you are in luck.”

“I hope so. The plate I need you to run is two, tango, twelve, five, zeta, alpha. See if one of the names on the register belongs to a former national guardsman. Hurry.”

Over the phone, I could hear the dispatcher running the plate through a local database. The clicks of the keyboard might as well be running off of firecrackers for how fast they moved. Finally, a tone that indicated a result echoed on the phone. On my end of the line, I pretended that I was talking with family and putting away groceries while watching out my target out of the corner of my eye. When Shandra and Ramona emptied the cart, they abandoned it in another parking space and hurried into the vehicle. As they drove off I

could hear the dispatcher adjusting her headset so she could give me the results of her search. “I have the names pulled up, the vehicle belongs to a couple here in Twin Falls and the husband is former military, Army National Guard to be exact. The house on their driver's licenses have been reported for several domestics within the last forty-eight hours but responders found no evidence of assault, but they noted that their teenage daughter showed some signs of aggression,” she told me.

“Fucking shit. Check to see if the husband has police connections, perhaps a relative in uniform, something along the lines of a brother or even a close cousin. The daughter has burn marks around her neck that looked like somebody much larger than she tried to choke her to death with a belt and by what I just witnessed another ugly ass fight is on the way,” I ordered the dispatcher.

More keyboard clicks rattled off on the other end of the line as I returned the cart to a nearby metal stall full of others. From the metal stall, I used the car remote to unlock my vehicle so I could ready myself for a death march. The sound of a hand rubbing against a microphone crawled through the line.

“Yes, one of the first responders was the husband's brother. If you want cops involved the officer is not working right now,” she had told me.

“Good, is officer Jerome on duty?” I asked.

“Yes but his shift is almost over.”

“I need you to make sure he is a first responder to this one. The daughter goes to the school that he works, I also go to that school that is how I know the young girl. She is in danger. Right now they are mobile in a blue, four-door sedan heading southbound on Madison Street heading towards the library. Possibly heading home cause they just got groceries.”

“Alright, we will send responders to their home. Do you have anything else to add?”

“Yes, if the daughter needs to get away tell the officers to give me a call. I have plenty of room and I just got enough groceries to last a month.”

“Dakota you know we cannot legally do that.”

“I know. She has my card, and Jerome will know what to do with it.”

Out of frustration for the dispatcher, I snapped my phone shut and started the car. The dispatcher on the other end, while she may just be doing her job, was getting annoying. I was trying to save someone's life but was being blocked by the pathetic technicalities. It is one thing to have rules, but the rules to certify one to save the life are boundaries that hold back so many from doing the right thing. But the appropriate thing to do in that moment was to wait for the boys in blue to see the problem before I could dissect the issue without it escalating into undesired territory. I didn't want to kill anybody, but a testosterone frenzy might not have left me with any choice. If somebody was

going to die that day it needed to be at the hands of an officer. I needed to wait until my armies saw the flares on the horizon before I could sound off the charge. Too many casualties would have resulted.

I left the parking lot and made my way into the street, almost causing a wreck inside of the intersection. This part of town was literally responsible for a majority of vehicular deaths because of people's lack of attention. Many children have died on this road just trying to get home from the high school because the routes they would take lacked any method to cross legally. The unfortunate truth is that driver's hardly stopped for the pedestrian. Even the tallest of students would have had to pull off walking across moving cars in order to get home safely. Thankfully I had a car to avoid those problems.

My house was about a half a mile away from the store, but the second largest intersection was under construction since March and crews hardly had anything done. Having to take a back route I hurried to my house so I could have tucked away my groceries before my guest arrived. Not many people traveled these roads during the daylight hours unless it was to mend an emergency at home. One of the many simple facts that allow those in power to think of the people as nothing but bees going about their business until they meet their demise.

When the screech of old tires met the gravel driveway, I was greeted by a couple stray Shar Pei puppies that occasionally wandered around here. They knew that coming around here, they would get food and occasional shelter if the weather was bad. These dogs, even though they were just a few months old, were very intelligent. After a tour of a gated backyard, they knew right where to go if they were in the need of something. For the winters and rain, they would tuck themselves under a few old blankets in a heated shed that was in my backyard that I had renovated just for them. Since there were several abusive and neglectful, I was visited frequently by lost pets alike. Many have tried to label me as a hoarder because the animals would spread the word out about a salvation and many would come, but my various unknown connections managed to have me put as nothing more than a good Samaritan that helps out small animals.

As long as they never attacked a person or each other, it was never a problem. The reason was the hidden kindness that lies within all hearts, and for that many amazing things could be seen here. Snakes that played a game of tag with a puppy. Kittens that would sing along with the birds. Perhaps the most amazing, seeing a dog that held scares from its past torture give away a blanket to another that was pregnant. Many lives were changed, helped, saved, and even begun here. I made this place to serve as a home and a sanctuary for all that entered.

From the corner of my eye, I could see the Shar Pei pups taking turns playing with a large rubber ball that the other has left behind. They had not a care in the world, and went on like this was their home. I always enjoyed seeing that, knowing that somehow my soul was cleansed for helping another creature of this Earth. Perhaps it was something that was needed to be seen by my dear

friend.

As I hurried in and out of my house while putting groceries away, a ringtone from my phone played, indicating that a text message was received. When the last pack of noodles, and thankfully the last item just bought, was stored in the top cupboard I pulled out my phone to check the message. “Officer Jerome,” read the display. Pressing the SEND button I opened the text in order to reveal its contents.

“Just got a call from dispatch. Said you wanted me at a case, why?” asked the officer.

I began typing, “The girl involved is a victim of a police cover-up, is being abused by her father, and is a fellow student at your school.”

Minutes later a reply appeared. Much later than the usual. “I hate when you're right. Can you come and get her?” he asked.

“Just send me the address and I'll be there in five.”

As my phone locked itself up I hurried outside, only securing the bottom lock on my front door. I unlocked the doors to my car when the phones signaled for another message. When I was in the car I cracked open the flip-phone to reveal the message.

“Seven, thirteen, main street,” I quietly read off.

Shandra's house was located just across the street from the public library. I knew right where she was this whole time without even realizing it. But her location was a small fraction of my worries at that point, it was whether or not she was okay that had me worried the most. My tires soon knew that there was trouble for how loud they screamed while coming out of the driveway and onto the main road.

Car on the roads had diminished in quantity on the roadways allowing for speed to take over my ride without worry of any damage. Any hill that came into our path might as well have been runways at the airport for how many times my car went airborne. From the other cars, I could hear the tones from the keypads of other cell phones signaling for emergency vehicles. In the passenger seat, my demonic counterpart emerges.

“Can you take out the cell phones?” I asked him.

“That and more,” he said with the devilish grin.

“No deaths got it?”

“Don't worry, there are too many kids on the way.”

“Than get it done. Turn it off when we get there.”

My Shadow Hunter flew through the roof in a veil of darkness. Another trick in our bag that we had been developing for a while would mimic the effects of an electromagnetic pulse just in case we needed to cloak ourselves in radio silence. The only difference was we could turn it off. Dark lightning struck the other vehicles disabling all functions to their engines and phones. I would be

without interruption until the moment the bumpers hit the curb in front of Shandra's house. My ETA to Jerry about my arrival was about to be halved. If only actual police response was this fast.

Minutes passed when I finally spotted the police lights in the reflections of the library windows. I spotted three police cruisers, one of which contained an attack dog, parked on the grass in front of the house. Police tape was being strung around the property to secure the premises. I parked my car behind one of the cruisers and jumped out of my car. At the sound of the car door slamming, a bone-thick officer met me at the police line. He sticks his arm out in an attempt to hold me back.

“Sir, we can't let you across,” he said.

“Get Officer Jerome out here!” I shouted. I know the officer had no clue who I was, but I did not have the time to argue with him.

From inside the house, I could hear a familiar voice shout, “It's alright Cortez, I called him here.”

Officer Cortez kept his hand held out as he turned to face a broken doorway that leads into the secured house. I watched through the windows to see Jerry with his arm around a female figure. Jerry was a man that was close to my stature. Seeing him hold on to the girl must have been appeared similar to what the next few moments when she would be in my arms would look like.

As he emerged the female was revealed to be a bruised Shandra that tucked her head into a police officer's jacket. The burns around her neck had become darker since I last saw the. Her eyes cried tears of blood. Every part of her body I could see was now beaten to a literal black, blue and bloody image. It was a miracle that I was able to recognize her. She lifted her head up after Jerry gave her a tap on the shoulder to let her know I had arrived. When she looked at me the fear in her eyes was nearly hypnotizing, I couldn't believe it.

I knew she was in trouble, but seeing the intensity of her battle first hand where she couldn't try to hide it away brought on new levels of every thought that ran through my head.

“Are you sure?” asked Cortez.

Jerry walked Shandra over a few steps before she nearly flew into me. Her arms gripped me even tighter than before, nearly breaking my neck. The sight nearly startled everyone that was on scene, and thankfully gave Cortez his answer. Both officers that had been monitoring us glanced at each other.

“Never mind then,” said Cortez with a sigh of relief.

“Why don't you move along? I need to talk with these two real quick before med-units arrive,” said Jerry while placed his hand on Cortez's shoulder.

“Yeah, I'll go see what the hold-up is.”

Cortez brushed the hand off his shoulder then walked over to his cruiser to radio dispatch. I gently placed my hand around Shandra to avoid hurting her anymore. She turned her head to face Jerry while leaning on my

chest. Jerry tucked his thumbs underneath his belt as he readied to talk.

"So what's the situation?" I asked.

"She and her mom got beat up pretty bad, I think that both will be okay but we need have med-units examine both before they leave the scene. Can you hold out? I know you probably have some things to look through from your last case."

"Yeah, I can stay for as long as I am needed."

"You might be here for a while."

Officer Cortez waved his hand towards us. "Hey Jerry, can I get you to come here for a minute?"

Jerry turned and shouted, "Yeah, just hold on a second." He looked me in the eyes. "You guys going to be okay?" he asked. Shandra and I both nodded our heads. "Good," he replied.

As Jerry jogged over to Cortez, I lead Shandra over to the hood of my car so we would have a place to sit while we waited for the ambulance crew to arrive. We sat on the hood and Shandra crossed her legs over mine. "Do your legs hurt?" I asked her.

She nodded her head yes. "It hurts when you hold me," she whispered.

"I am sorry."

"It's okay. I just wish that was all that it was."

"You and me both."

Shandra dug herself farther into my chest. I felt a slight shiver from her that slithered its way onto my arms. As I tried to focus the warmth of my body onto her, I closed my eyes to shut off all of my senses except for hearing and touch. The girl in my arms was hurt, she needed to be healed. I managed to establish a connection into her mind, one much stronger than before, in order to get a better look at where she was hurt. I tried to imagine all of her injuries slowly disappearing as if they had never existed in the first place.

Sounds of the ambulance sirens awoke me from the trance I was in. The rest of the world tuned away from me as I tried to mend Shandra's wounds to a much more tolerable trouble she was painted with. The paramedics walked up to Jerry to get an idea of the situation, which quickly ended with Jerry waving me towards the ambulance. "Can you get up?" I asked Shandra.

"No," she replied.

"Okay. The paramedics are finally here. They need to make sure that you're okay before I can take you out of here."

"Please carry me."

"I will."

I forced myself upward from the hood of my car. As I stood the car moaned in celebration of a vanished weight that was lifted off of it. The cement

of the sidewalk felt like a cooling fire underneath the soles of my shoes with each step I took moving closer the ambulance. From inside the house, I could see Shandra's mother slowly watching me as I carried her daughter across guarded path. Both were no longer in danger once one of them broke free. Setting Shandra on the metal tailgate, I allowed for the paramedics to examine her. Both of them were short Hispanic females with their hair tied up. The stress of a long day was apparent when seeing their faces that almost looked like they had aged ten years within a ten-hour time frame.

I made sure to say close to the ambulance so Shandra could know her ticket away from this mess was still valid. As the paramedics started to sign a light into Shandra's eyes, I asked my Light Hunter to take a few moments to heal her.

He stuck to her side, without being noticed by anyone else, and used his hands to shine a bright white light on Shandra. This granted her enough strength to pass all of the tests the medical units would utilize to fully understand her condition, temporarily masking it as nothing more than a few bumps and bruises. My focus was taken when I felt a finger give me a tap on the shoulder. I turned to face who was trying to get my attention. It was Jerry signaling with his finger that he needed to speak with me.

We walked a few feet away from the ambulance, my guess at the time was to mask a conversation that would turn Shandra uneasy. Stopping on a sidewalk pathway that leads into the house Jerry turned towards me with a stressed look nearly plastered to his face.

Jerry was a taller guy with a heavy build to him. His hair reminded me of a stereotypical military buzz cut that he had styled to make himself appear more intimidating. Despite his figure, he was actually a big softy. When the job hadn't been on his mind he was typical down-to-earth guy.

But a few months ago I witnessed a change in him. He had asked me to personally intervene when his teenage daughter started having hallucinations after coming home from middle school with bruises on her arm. The “episodes,” as he described them, often involved conversations with dead relatives. After a few sessions, I was able to uncover that she was attacked by a boy from school. Jerry made sure that the boy was serving a full sentence. Inevitably, seeing how well it all turned out, Jerry suggested that we form a sort of shadow net between us. He would have me come in on a case he felt was slipping through the cracks of the legal system and use my supernatural connections to expose hidden truths the police were unable to see to help get the suspects behind bars. In return, I asked for Jerry to pull some strings whenever I managed to tail some suspicious activity I uncovered while on my cases in order to save those the police never knew about. It was a very risky and complex system, but somehow we managed to make it work.

“Dakota, are you sure you want to take on this case?” he asked.

“You asked me that when we pushed your daughter's case. What do you think my answer is going to be?” I replied.

"This case is different. The guy is an old National Guardsman! He gets pushed through people will notice."

"I am pretty sure the moment that his superiors get word of this, there will charge added to the case that will bring him down. Forensics managed to get the photos of Shandra's marks before I healed her, right?"

"Yes, but..."

"But nothing. Make sure that those are the photos that they see, case closed."

"No case not closed! What the hell am I supposed to do in order to excuse that somebody who is not a relative taking her into the damn social workers? Cause they are about to get here any minute now and you know how fucking bullheaded most of them are!"

"Try to put forward that this would be the only way for her to not miss out on school. If there is any resistance I will put forward a little persuasion," I said giving my head a couple gentle taps. Jerry's eyes nearly leaped from their sockets to attempt to smack me upside for even speaking of such an outrageous idea.

"Are you nuts? You can't just do that to people!" he forced.

"I am not going to force her to do anything. I am just going to charm an ideal solution. All it will take is to convince them that Shandra's safety and well-being will be better kept this way than any other alternative. Then they will check my file and see that I am a criminal informant that specializes in these types of cases. Everything will be just fine."

"I hate it when you get like this. It freaks me out every time," he said gritting his teeth.

"I know, but how many times have we saved the day because of it?" I asked joking about our past.

"Yeah, yeah, shut up. Regardless of what we have done in the past, you need to be careful, I don't need you getting compromised because of Florence Nightingale Syndrome."

"It doesn't count if I already had feelings for her beforehand."

"What about her? What if she starts developing feelings for you?"

"If that happens then we have the perfect opening for her to come to one of us for help as soon as something comes up."

"Dakota, I am not saying you two shouldn't get romantically involved. I am just saying that you need to find a way to separate yourself otherwise you will only end up getting yourself killed if something happens."

Another couple of taps gently alert my shoulder when I tried to continue the banter between myself and Jerry. Catching a quick glimpse of his face, Jerry gave away the fact that it was someone that held the most influence to this case than anyone else. Slowly turning around to see who it has, I was

surprised to see that it was Shandra who had walked on her own just to see us.

"Hey. How did it go?" I asked her.

"Fine, they just said that I should just take it easy for a few days," she said.

"Good. That can easily be arranged," I said glancing towards Jerry.

"What do you mean? What is gonna happen now?" she asked.

"We are going to place you under protective custody. At least for a couple weeks while the investigation continues," said Jerry.

"A couple weeks?" shrieked Shandra, "I don't want to go to some foster home for a couple weeks, the people there could be much worse!"

"I know, I know. But we have an arrangement that would benefit everyone, even though in most cases it would be impossible to pull off. You will be staying with a close partner of mine here in town. That way you won't miss anything at school and you won't have to worry about getting moved around the state. Plus if you ever run into trouble, I'd much rather prefer that you would be around him than anyone else. He will take care of you."

"What do you mean? Who is it?"

Giving Shandra a playful two-fingered wave, I let her know that I was the one Jerry had been mentioning. The logic behind his words rang true. I have been known for a short-temper and getting protective of a select few thus making me a much more valued guardian for Shandra and Jerry knew it. He knew that is she was ever harmed I would always be one of the first to go on the defense in her honor, then be able to heal any wound she received. There were limitations as to what I could do with these abilities. But with a few adaptations, nothing could defeat me. At the news of an unsung warrior coming to her aid, Shandra naturally became full of worry.

"Dakota?" she asked.

"I figured that coming with me would be a more favorable outcome to all of this," I answered.

"Are you sure?" she asked, "I wouldn't want to impose."

"It is no imposition. I made a promise to always answer your call, this is one of those answers. There is plenty of everything for both of us at my place."

"So... you're serious?"

"Yes, I am."

"Thank you. Not a lot of guys would do that for a girl they just met."

As my mouth attempted to open, Officer Jerry interrupted in a rush. "I hate to interrupt this lovey-dovey moment, but the social workers are on their way and they will try to tear apart our arrangement. So Shandra, why don't you get about two weeks worth of stuff packed up?" he ordered.

Shandra gave no argument and simply replied, “Alright. But can you come with me, Dakota?”

“Sure thing,” I answered.

Shandra reached out her hand with her palm facing towards the sky. She held it out in expectations of a gift. In retrospect, I worried that what I had to offer was not enough. A roof over her head, decent food, and a sworn oath for complete protection was in my hands just for her, but I could not help but worry that it was enough. This girl was being pulled away from the very shadows that consumed her spirit, the very reasons for the fortress hidden inside her. I worried that whatever pleasantries I could provide would not be enough for her to see that the shadows made by the materials blessed with the sunlight were no agent of darkness.

But the questions that ran through my head weren't enough to hold me back from what I was doing. Gripping on to her hand, it was a leap of faith, but one much needed. There was no instruction to my job, other than doing what felt right and what was needed. The right thing to do was to come with Shandra through the ashes.

I followed Shandra through the doors of her house while observing every detail of the nearly war-torn “home.” Knifes tossed into the walls, furniture tossed around, glass from the family photos coated the carpets, and walls filled with holes the size of televisions took over everything in sight. The house seemed like it witnessed its own tornado. I could hear the cracks of the broken glass underneath the feet of everyone in the house. Forensic's crews had been doing a final sweep of the place and were just walking out to put up the final barricades as Shandra lead me up a series of stairs. I tried to study the trace evidence around the stairway, starting with large blood spatter on the wall at the bottom of the stairway. Trying to picture what had happened the images of a bloodied Shandra filled my head. From the size of the first blow and the size of the blood drips that trailed up the stairs, it was obvious that Shandra was close to death.

Upstairs the carpets became much thicker, but that was the only difference. The battle that took place in this house stayed on the first level. The drips of blood were the only sign of disruption up there. In fact, if the mess downstairs had not existed, this would only look like a desperate attempt to stop a bloody nose. Shandra then lead me to her bedroom where she finally let go of my hand to begin gathering her stuff.

Parts of a person's personality can be noticed by the way they kept their room. Disorganization often showed signs of a mind that took on much more than it was capable of handling. A clean room that was organized gave away that the owner tried their best to keep their own worlds together. To an investigator of these types of crimes seeing that the teenager kept the room cleaned was a sign of hope. A sign that the child still had a chance to do some good in the world.

Even though I wasn't an official investigator for these incidents, I

became filled with that very hope. If this abuse had cycled through her family, much like it did my own, there was a chance she could be the sole heir to break all ties. A burden that would trouble her for the rest of her life.

Shandra pulled out a luggage bag with an expandable handle so she could pack up everything. Out of respect for what she may pull out, I turned my back so I wouldn't see it. When I turned I noticed a photograph of much younger Shandra and another father-like figure posing on a boat. Studying the picture I began to hear a familiar grandmother-like voice in my head. “War changes everything,” she whispered. She was right, war does change everything. I couldn't help but wonder who the other man was in the photo, but I couldn't bring myself to ask Shandra.

Because the nation liked to ignore the mental state of its troops and replace it with the ill-guided concept of being the “Kings of the World,” so many of our men and women who return from war are often changed forever. Many times this would corrupt them, making them capable of leveling with the actions of the enemy at home. If the man in the photo was the same man I suspected of harming Shandra, I would have a feeling that was the case. But, since it was a completely different man I actually knew that at some point there was another party involved in Shandra's story. However, I didn't give it much thought at the time.

I have always had an admiration for the troops that willingly sought for help after they came back from a war zone because I knew what could happen. Little do people realize is that too many soldiers won't go seek help and end up worse than the very guys they fought. When the media caught wind of their actions, they wouldn't bother with the fact of their military status, therefore the public would be blind when the actions of a deranged soldier emerged.

I didn't want to ask, but I needed to see if Shandra was willing to talk about what happened before I arrived. “So how did it happen?” I asked.

I glanced behind me to study her body language to read what she might have tried to hide. I wasn't expecting her to lie, but I knew there was a chance that she wouldn't want to admit to her troubles.

“Uh... my parents got into a fight, then my dad got a little rough. I tried to stop them but I only made it worse. When it kept going I hurried upstairs to call the police, but then the lady said they were already on their way so I started to freak out...” she said choking on tears.

Shandra froze as her back was turned to me. The sun froze as well in order to take the time to shine upon a wounded soul. It seemed the entire world had frozen that moment. Stars had formed on the pink walls just above a wooden dresser. It was hard to tell at the time, but angels had finally come to her side in a time of complete darkness, now illuminating a new destiny.

She turned around to face me with bloodshot eyes and waterfalls in the place of tears and slowly walked forward in my direction. Each step I noticed her body grew weaker. Then right at my feet, she collapses into a lake of tears that began to form at our feet. I dove and caught her on the sides to pull her up.

She swung her arms around me as if she was holding on for dear life.

"Dakota, this is all my fault. I should have done more to stop this when this all began!" she cried out.

At the sound of her plea, tears began to emerge from my own eyes.

"Let's get you on the bed," I said while trying to avoid losing it for Shandra.

After walking her over to the twin-sized bed we both sat on its side as I laid her head against my chest right over my heart. When I felt the tears soaking through my skirt and continuing to roll down my body, I placed my left index finger just above her temple and traced tiny hearts, just to ease the pain that my powers could not take away. Moments floated away while waiting for her cries to come to an ease.

This was not your fault. None of this was ever your fault," I whispered.

The chokes of her despair had slowed. "Yes... it is," she said, "All of my family blames me for this ever since it started."

"Shandra, don't let them make you believe that. None of this was your fault."

"But I could have stopped it. I could have saved him when he came back from the war."

"There was nothing you could have done. Trust me, I know what it is like to feel guilty about the pain you see when a loved one is hurt. I know just how much you would do just to fix what has been done. And I know just how much it hurts when there is nothing you could do."

Shandra sat up and wiped off her tears. "How would you know?" she asked.

"I think that we need to get you out of here and relaxed before I can say anything," I said.

"Okay."

Shandra stood and continued packing. I stayed on her bed hunched over and wiping my own tears away. While sitting on her bed watching as she gently placed her clothes in the bag I noted everything that she packed, just in case something was to get lost. Rose colored shirts, various lotions, countless make-up, and a small stuffed polar bear with a red heart patched over its chest. Perhaps it was a comfort item from a lost childhood. I couldn't judge her because I held on to a gift from my own childhood at a time when things made a turn for the worse. The sound of the zipper returned my attention to Shandra.

"Do you have everything?" I asked.

She nodded her head, "yes" and from the look on her face, I could tell something was on her mind. Focusing on the individual threads of her irises I began to hear the words. 'I just want to leave,' whispered her mind.

"Then let's go," I said.

Shandra became shocked at my response. Her eyes nearly leaped from her head to force my probes out of her head. “How did you do that?” she asked.

“You will see soon enough,” I answered.

Shandra grabbed her bag and walked to my side. Wrapping my arm around her, I pulled her close and gave her a gentle kiss on the forehead. As I pulled away the look on her face had shifted into something much deeper. Her eyes fixed solidly to mine. Her lips slowly grew in size as they merged together, yet her eyes never changed position. But in a split moment, I could not see or hear anything, with nothing more than her arms around my neck letting me know what was happening. The taste of her lips sliding over mine was intoxicating to my mind. Every thought in my mind could be felt flowing away with each gentle move. Shandra's soul was starting to shine brighter than anything the god Helios would have none, she was finally breaking free.

To tell you the truth, that was probably the best kiss I ever had. Shandra had leaped from the floor, just moments before, so she could return an ever desired moment for both of us. She locked her fingers behind my neck to hold on, nearly making herself float as I stood.

“Shall we get out of here?” I asked. Shandra nodded her head “yes” and let out a slight giggle. While giving her another kiss on the forehead I noticed a smile broke free of its constraints, one that I could have brought back with a few simple pleasant surprises down the road.

Slowly, she unlocked her hands then slid them onto my chest, as if she was looking for my heart. A search needed to check for a dying knowledge, one that shows when genuine care is shown for another person. The search for when two hearts will begin to sing a duet. Each beat will slowly pace itself to match the other, making each other as recognizable as strands of light from the same star.

I wrapped my arm around Shandra and guided her back through the house. Once we reached the stairs she let me take the lead. I carefully looked to see a tall woman with her hair tied up and a long jacket covering most of her body standing in the front doorway. A lanyard around her next gave away her purpose. She was a social worker there to take Shandra. Perhaps the lessons of the ancient Chinese White Snake would get a chance to bite.

I faced Shandra so I could signal for silence, then pointed towards the doorway. She glanced over in near confusion until she identified the problem for herself. The woman was there to see to it that Shandra was pushed through the system like cargo on the back of a delivery truck. Shandra was aware of what could happen if the state had its way. I couldn't let that happen. I didn't know it at the time, but she was needed for a much greater purpose.

“Let me handle her,” I whispered.

“Okay,” she whispered.

I walked over to the doorway in order to greet the social worker. As I came closer I could begin to hear Jerry's voice speaking to the woman. His tone

almost sounded like a brother pleading to a stubborn sister to avoid getting in trouble.

"I assure you that Frandsen is one of our most reliable resources for cases like these. He will make sure Shandra is kept safe," he said.

"I have heard of Mr. Frandsen. His name pops up in many cases that involve supernatural materials. Normally, I wouldn't allow your suggestions to be put through the system but under the circumstances, I can allow it. But before anything moves further I must know something. Why is it that he takes such a personal approach to this particular case?" she asked.

Shandra and I emerged from the door as I tucked my arms behind my back with gentle but stern shoulders. "It is because I happen to go to school with Shandra," I interrupted. The social worker turned to face me.

"It is nice to finally meet you. I have heard a lot about what you do."

"I hope that the word about me is good."

"Don't worry. Other than your behavior towards your father's case, you have a pretty good standing."

"Well, wouldn't you be a little worried about people that didn't get angry considering what he did?"

"I know, I know. It was disgusting when the test results confirmed the allegations. But are you sure you want to handle this case? There are lots of foster homes that can take care of her."

"I am sure. But if I let you start treating her like cargo, you will lose her. Plus once foster care hasn't been linked to almost all heavy criminal offenders, then I would consider it a safe option."

"Understood. I see you are pretty locked in your decision. Be sure to take good care of her. But don't even think about trying anything, there will surveillance monitoring your house 24/7 and I will personally be coming in to inspect the premises."

"I understand, other than a couple busted door hinges that were there before I moved in you will find everything will be suitable. Now if you excuse me."

Shandra and I started to walk towards the car when I was stopped by the social worker who placed her hand on my shoulder. "I hope you know what you're doing," she whispered.

"Don't worry. You would be surprised how much people begin to trust you when they realize that you can take away their nightmares inside of hiding from them," I told her. In some sense, I was making fun of the pathetic system known as foster care. Regardless of what lawyers and judges try to say, it was extremely rare for prison cells and foster homes to actually improve anything.

She removed her hand from my shoulder, knowing it would be impossible to make me nervous about what I was doing, allowing Shandra and I

to walk away from the scene. Every person around the house watched us as we walked away, frozen in a dead man's march gaze. I took Shandra's bag and slid it into the backseat. Shandra stood by the passenger side door as I walked around. Something had jammed the handle, making it a test of strength few actually could pass. I jerked the door open holding it for my guest. She sat in the seat while laying her head back. She was obviously tired from the day she experienced.

The car nearly shrunk under my weight as I sat in the driver's seat. Sliding the key into the silver ignition, the engine roared like a lion away from a fight. The clicks of the gear stick shifted the car making it able to drive. Pressing my foot on the gas, I was providing the one thing Shandra needed more than anything else, a getaway.

Shandra probably felt as if she was stuck inside a demonic torture chamber for centuries before Jerry and I came to bail her out that day. The smell of freshly-cut skin soaked in the boiled blood of the innocent victims taken by the demon's tools disappeared as we drove away.

A secret that lies inside the experience of death, regardless if the destination is the Chamber of Elders to plan a new life, or the final extreme, is that the soul splits in two after every death. The purest of emotions take on the form of light and rejoin the main colors of the cosmos. As for the corruption, that is too heavy to carry and gets drawn into the lowest realms where they form the demons that haunted us.

Thankfully, the flesh of a demon is much like an open wound of one's worst enemy; just cover it with some salt and cover your ears while it screams. It was one of the many secrets I learned over the course of my journey, opening windows into countless worlds. That night one of the windows peered into the world of someone I saw on a daily basis without even realizing it. It also came with the chance just to change one world forever, an idea that I had fantasized about in so many ways. Yet the methods that manifested were not ones I had imagined previously, I just figured it would be best just to adjust as time went on.

Taking the same road as I did when this mess began, I could hear Shandra breathing heavily from rotten memories. I placed my hand on her leg to let her know she was safe now. A smile on her face grew out of the gesture. I removed my hand and placed it back on the wheel so I could continue driving towards my house for the next couple minutes. The site of a foggy cemetery slowly reaching my driveway might have been uneasy for most, but for me, it was rather welcoming. The spirits I hunted were cloaked in that fog. Even a couple of my ancestors would visit whenever it appeared.

While pulling into the driveway I put my car into park. The sound of the gears shifting and the jingle of my keys from the accidental grace of my sausage fingers seemed to whisper a welcoming message.

“So this is where you live?” asked Shandra.

“Yeah, it's an alright place. You will like it here,” I answered.

"I can already tell. But how is the bath?"

"Comfortable. It has been a while since I have last used it but it should be just perfect for you."

"Great, I could definitely use one."

"I could only imagine. I'll get your bag for you."

Shandra and I got out of the car to welcome ourselves into what many would probably describe as a teenager's dream house. We practically had the capability to do anything without the restrictions of parents to nag us. Being a bit of a loner I never had many people over so there were never wild parties, just brief moments of insanity emerging when I got a little too involved in certain activities. Shandra, at least from what I was able to read, was that way as well. But that was probably due to circumstances at her household.

I knew of at least two possible reactions to her sudden freedom that I could have seen manifesting. Either she would slowly adapt to the new life or she would push the adaptation too far too soon and only run into more trouble in the end. So she would not meet the same fate as many who have built a so-called "high life" around fragile monetary grounds, I needed to guide her down the path with many fruits few seek in the modern day. Call me old school, but I preferred to observe these types relationships as something cherished and divine instead something that is always around.

While stepping over to the door to the back seat I grabbed out Shandra's bag and closed up the car. Shandra had already reached the front door of my house, standing on a cement landing with three steps leading up to it. She watched as I carried her bag with my keys in hand, shuffling through them to find the appropriate key to unlock the door. Once my feet reached the landing the key allowed itself to be seen and even slid itself into the lock. I led Shandra up the front steps and into my living room.

"It's nice," Shandra said while looking at the surroundings. As she observed the series of gaming consoles next to the television I could see a slight grin begin to bloom. She had a bit of a gamer in her.

"All of them are working if you want to hop on sometime," I told her.

She looked towards me with a loving smile. "Good. But can I ask you where the bathroom is? I really should take a bath," she responded.

"Yeah just head upstairs and go to the second door on the right. The bedroom is through the door to the left of it," I answered.

"Thank you."

Shandra took her bag and hurried up the stairs. I could hear each rushed stomp on every stair, twenty steps total. The carpet upstairs had muffled her footsteps as she entered the bathroom. I could hear her bag unzipping and set out clothes for her to change into once she was finished. The gentle breeze from clothing hitting the floor.

"I know she is beautiful, but you need to focus on the case," growled

my Shadow Hunter.

"Shut the hell up," I whispered.

Regardless of what I felt, he was right. I was allowing ancient instinct to override my job. The thought of embracing Shandra as she deserved came close to poisoning the job at hand. The thrill of the day was driving a hungry beast inside me that existed long before my acquaintance with my Shadow and Light hunters. One I needed to keep under wraps, at least for a little bit.

"Aren't you needing to get your gear?" asked my Light Hunter.

"Yeah, yeah. Just help me find who was wanting to talk," I ordered.

"As you wish."

Both of my alter egos followed orders without question. They always helped when I would ask and occasionally offer up advice on how to do things better. I tried not to diffuse them from the collective, otherwise, everything else would fall apart. Honestly, they were both right. It was time I brought in my equipment. I made my keys dance in between my fingers as I walked back outside and went directly for the trunk of my car.

The gravel underneath my feet crunched under my weight. Holding the car remote next to my ear I pressed the button to unlatch the gizmos that held the trunk shut. With a loud thud, the trunk cover threw itself upward revealing the soldiers of an immobile expedition. Grabbing as many bags as I could with each trip, I set all of the bags down in the living room before the trip upstairs. After four arm lengthening trips, all of my bags had rested themselves on the floor. Two presses of the car remote send a message of goodnight to the vehicle.

Upstairs I could hear a disturbance in a small body of water. Shandra had heard me bringing in my equipment from the car but wasn't sure of my identity. "Dakota is everything alright?" she yelled.

"Yeah. I was just bringing in a few things from the car."

"Okay."

The water in the tub began to dance welcoming Shandra's skin to what probably felt like a sense of serenity. I could hear it dancing with each movement she made as I began to bring my equipment upstairs so I could analyze everything I collected. The upstairs was slightly cramped in the hallway that grew from the stairway, with most of the floor being occupied by a couple bedrooms and bathroom. Right in front of the stairway exit was the entrance to the larger bedroom. Following about seven feet of wall bent at a ninety-degree angle was the closed door leading into the bathroom. Then following another two feet of wall another doorway was present leading into my office. Slowly moving the bags upstairs, just to avoid beating the more sensitive gear senseless, I placed everything next to the computer desk. Nearly summoning the office chair with a wave of my hand, I sat down and began unpacking everything.

The first bag I opened was a large luggage bag typically seen on hotel trips. It carried my DVR system inside. I placed the main hard drive on a shelf

hanging just above the desk and used special cables to connect it to the main network, allow me to shift through its files if needed. Inside the bag also lied the four cameras that came with system. I wrapped them in the original boxes and tucked them in a small, walk-in closet. The various gadgets that were packed away in the following bags also were organized there by function. If it read the environment, it would be bundled with others like it. If it recorded video or audio, it would be set in another group. In short, one may describe the way I organized my gadgets could be compared to a three-dimensional pie chart since I even set some of it in little bowls nailed to the walls of the closet. Usually, various types of loose batteries or protection amulets of all sorts were stored in them.

Once all of the bags were emptied, and the long cords from my cameras were tightly wrapped around storage reels, I set my laptop on my desk. Next, to it I placed the memory cards from my hand held cameras and a digital voice recorder with a long patching cable attached so I could begin moving the files onto my computer. When everything had finally been set, I settled down and turned on the computer. While waiting for everything to load, I could not help but hear a cheerful hum coming from the bathtub in the next room. It was rather relaxing, perhaps it was something from her childhood.

As my computer booted up in sync with the rest of the network I snapped one end of the patching cable into the microphone port on my computer and loaded a sound editing software. Because my recorder didn't have a way to move files onto a computer, I had to manually re-record them to the network using a free software I found online; it wasn't the best out there, it wasn't what a lot of major production studios would use. The program was something I found to save money that did the job exceptionally well. If one were to change how the software displayed the sound recording, infrasound was mapped on the screen.

Infrasound was the term used to describe sounds under the normal human range of hearing. These were the frequencies where the voices of spirits often existed. It wasn't because they existed in different dimensions, or even on an astral plane, and sound had a hard time breaking through the barriers. It was due to the fact spirits were intelligent manifestations of photon particles that formed themselves into “moldings” placed by the image of a person based on the last image they saw of themselves before they died. In short, these types of manifestations simply had a hard time making some noise.

On the computer I pressed the record button inside the software, then pressed play on the recorder, starting the process. I had changed the layout of the sound input so it would map the individual layers of sound. I opened a nearby notepad with a pencil shoved through its metal threading to a fresh page to document all of the timestamps that infrasound existed.

As I watched the recording play out on the screen, unable to hear its contents, I could hear Shandra talking to someone in a low tone. The wall muffled the words she spoke. I focused on her voice wondering who she was talking to because I didn't remember seeing a cell phone. In fact, I didn't have a land line in there. One thought was that she also had the habit of talking to

herself, but the speech was paused as if waiting for a response. After minutes had passed I finally made sense of just a few words. Even though they resembled a weak identification, but yet powerful in the same. Words that I remembered and would want to be etched into my gravestone.

"Dakota is the one," Shandra said.

I could not tell what she meant by those words. Did our time-traveling daughter, Olivia, reveal the truth she kept me away from, or if she meant a prophecy of her own. If she approached me about it, maybe I would be able to find out more. The echos of water adjusting to a moving body made me jump back into focus. Something about hearing that phrase made me worry about getting caught listening in on her while she was in the tub. I guess that I still had a bit of a shy approach to women, perhaps it was a good thing I did. Otherwise, I may have been tortured by instinctive temptations.

The drain in the tub gulped all of the dirty bath water as Shandra snapped her towel in the air. Slight steps could be heard on the bathroom floor. The breeze from long thick hair getting whipped around whistled through the cracks around the bathroom door. Something told me that the way she rushed to get out of that room was to speak with me about something. I could read her mind which was nearly cluttered with various thoughts that needed to be organized through an outlet otherwise she would have a restless night. That was alright; I am someone that practically saved her life and some people may take a discomfort to not knowing much about their hero.

As the bathroom door opened, the wood vibrated. Because the door was hollow. The only piece that held it together was the metal lock. The wrong jerk could easily rip that door apart. In a single step, Shandra leaped from the bathroom to the doorway of the office, standing in pink pajamas with tiny red hearts scattered all over them.

"Hey can we talk?" she asked.

"Of course. Please sit down," I said gesturing towards the cot just barely outside arm's length.

"You aren't too busy with... whatever you are doing?" she asked.

"No, I have at least four hours to copy over so I have plenty of time."

Shandra took my suggestion and sat on the camping bed, swaying side-to-side to make herself more comfortable. The shimmer of her wet black hair dancing in the setting sun held my attention to her eyes now clear of all troubles that had plagued her for many years. She let out a slight nervous sigh as she tried to organize her thoughts.

"What exactly is it that you do?" she asked.

"Well, my answer really depends on how much you understand," I answered.

"It's just that... I don't know. You are so kind, then I see you literally jump into my mind. You show me that you have your own business, then you

end up helping cops in order to let me stay at your place. You have been so all over the place it is hard to keep track of everything. Like, how in the heck did you get the social worker to let me come with you?"

"I see," I giggled, "I guess it is fair I fill you in on everything."

I remembered the time set on my computer for the screen saver. So I raised my left arm and snapped my fingers in synch with the activation of the screen saver after I had been idle on my computer for a minute, as a way to joke with the idea a mystery flowed around me. The screen showed metallic letters spelling out PRF, the acronym for my team's name, rotating in front of a black background.

"I hope that you do," said Shandra glancing at the letters.

I paused to think about what story I should tell first. As I took a moment to sort through my thoughts I realized it was rather odd knowing that a social worker would give up a teenage girl to a teenage boy who lived alone, even if I met special conditions. Most of the time they would be eager to ship of a poor child to the first free foster home on a state registry, even if it was decided to keep the child in the same city so they wouldn't miss school. My place wasn't on that registry, for obvious reasons. So how did Officer Jerome manage to convince the responding social worker to let Shandra stay with me? "You know, now that I think about it, I actually have no clue how it happened," I told her.

"Really? What about Officer Jerry? Wouldn't he know?" she asked.

It was hard to deliver an answer, simply because providing shelter for anyone I was trying to save was never a part of the plan. The Shadow Net that was formed between Jerry and me was designed to catch the victims that fell through legal cracks and keep them away from any sticky situation that might compromise their life. Somehow, actually having to keep someone in place was never considered, or even thought of, when the initial protocols were decided. Maybe Jerry had thought of something afterward and never told me.

"Why don't we give him a call? He still might be at your house," I said.

She nodded her head in agreement because she knew just as well that under typical conditions social workers will become damned and determined to pull kids away from "bad" parents, with the only good intention to keep siblings together. So I pulled out my phone and looked for Jerry's number through my contact list. I allowed my fingers to press send and turn on the speakerphone while it rang. Three rings later, somebody finally answered.

"This is Officer 71349, Tracey Jerome," he announced.

"Jerry, it's me," I told him.

"Dakota?" he asked, "Is everything okay with Shandra?"

"Everything is fine," I answered, "I need to ask you something."

"Let me guess, you're wonderin' how I managed to convince the social worker to let you two stay together?"

“Actually, yes that is what we were wondering.”

“The social worker is my sister, Elisa. She owes me a few favors so I figured I cash them in. Don't say I haven't done anything for you.”

Shandra and I jumped on the news. We didn't know Jerry had a sister or even any siblings for that matter. I had been working with the guy for some time now and only knew about his wife and two kids.

“You have a sister in social services?” I asked him.

“Yep, and a twin brother who's a navy seal,” he answered.

“Really? That explains a lot.”

“I hope it does because I need to go. The scene is wrapping up.”

“Alright, see ya.”

“Oh, and by the way, my sister will come by your place tomorrow afternoon just to check in. And don't worry, the paperwork is already blacked out.”

I hung up my phone and set it aside once I knew Jerry had done so. Once my phone made contact with my desk my mind quickly started to analyze the situation. Forensics must have finished up for the day. Shandra's house was going to be closed off due to the nature of what happened. Unless somebody had a badge or a forensics lanyard, nobody was going to be in or out of there for a while. Once the investigation was over, it would be likely somebody would have to go through and clean up the place before Shandra could go back home. Her case fits under very typical guidelines for domestic assault cases gone too far. But in her case, forces behind the scenes were manipulating all parties so a better future could come from it. Yet little did I know there were other forces tying together the loose ends.

Shandra was waving her hands in front of my face in order to catch my attention. “Hey Dakota, are you alright?” she asked.

“Yeah sorry. I sometimes zone out when my mind tries to read a bit more into what is happening,” I answered.

“Oh, okay. I was just asking what Jerry meant by, 'the paperwork is blacked out.' Does he mean no one will know I am here?”

“Only people that would be stupid enough to only look through the paperwork would be clueless about where you are at.”

“So how does that work?”

“Before the file is even copied, parts of it are crossed out with a special black marker. In your case, only enough information will remain to hint that you were put into a safe house. Just to make it look better there will also be information about the surveillance you and I are placed under.”

“So it's kinda like in the movies? Where a secret agent of the government looks through classified files?”

“Yeah, a little bit.”

Shandra let her eyes wander to the nearby closet where I had stored my equipment from the night before. I could tell by the look on her face that a new set of questions had emerged inside her head pertaining to how I managed to get wrapped up in everything I do.

“So, if you don't mind me asking, how is it that you got involved with all of this?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what was it that happened that lead you to start ghost investigating, or whatever it is that you do. Something like that doesn't come up out of nowhere.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean and you are right. Somebody like me, hunting ghosts and chasing bad guys at the age of fifteen is unusual.”

“So, how did it all start?”

I honestly had no clue on how to answer her question. There are three separate stories I could tell that contributed to how I became who I was, with each one coming to life at a different point in my lineage. But with some thought, I figured the best way to start was to tell the origin story I often shared in various interviews since it was the one I remembered best. It didn't necessarily cover why I chased bad guys, but it did cover my basis as to why I started ghost hunting.

Chapter 6
Field Trip Through Time

I bet many of you reading this are wondering the same thing. How does somebody become so involved in “paranormal” activities? Well to tell you the truth, everyone's answers to that question will be different but they did typically fall under three general categories. For some people, they decided to research the paranormal because of a personal experience. Others heard a story something through the grapevine about alleged ghosts haunting. Then there is the third category, consisting of individuals trying to emulate the paranormal investigation groups they happened to see on television. Personally, my story makes itself at home in all three categories. In fact, the story I am about to share was officially the first attempt my fate took in order to seal my destiny, or in many aspects, my curse.

I was nine years old when it happened. I don't exactly remember the date. All I really to remember is that the morning was cold, cloudy, and dark when it all began in the small town of Murtaugh. The school I went to was very small, only one classroom per grade-level. For Idaho history, the fourth-grade class always took a field trip to the Capitol in order to learn more about how the state grew from the mouths that called the shots across the state. Because our school was so small, the third-grade class got to join the trip in order to help get the school a larger group discount, which was the class I was in at the time.

On the day of the trip, everybody that was going had to meet up in front of the high school building at six in the morning. The overall district consisted of four structures; two schools, one gym, and a football field that stood in the middle of all four. So the teachers could fit in the tours of all the buildings we

would visit into normal school hours, and because the drive to the capital city of Boise took about two hours, everyone had to meet up before the crack of dawn. My mother had dropped me off with a large cooler I borrowed from my grandfather; full of chips, sodas, cream cakes and sandwiches for lunch. Once she noticed my friend Cherry had finally arrived, she left me in a crowd of tightly bundled children with small lunchboxes for their own meals. I always had the appetite of a professional football player so my mother always tried to make sure I had plenty to eat. If I couldn't finish during the time we were supposed to use solely for lunch, I could always split some of what remained with a buddy or two. As I made my way through the crowd I noticed Cherry was nearly asleep.

"Hey Cherry," I shouted.

"Hey Dakota," she groaned.

Cherry wasn't much of a morning person, so having to get up at four in the morning was a struggle for her. At that time I had a weird habit of waking up at four and would often find myself staying awake by playing a video game until I heard the screams of my mother's alarm clock. So inevitably I became the one to make sure she made it on the buses. It was alright, Cherry was the only one I got along with in the entire school other than a couple girls that happened to be my cousins.

As we sat near wilted rose bushes to wait for the buses, a teacher came out of the high school with a frustrated look plastered onto her face. "Alright students, I have some bad news. The fluids inside the bus froze so it is going to be a little longer before we can go to the capitol," she announced just before the waves of moans and groans.

The gas lines in the school buses often froze during the winter time, often leading to school being closed for the day. In most cases, everyone would be excited for even the slightest chance of no school but many of us were looking forward to the trip.

Murtaugh, along with much of Southern Idaho, didn't possess many fun activities for its inhabitants making a trip to the capitol the only exciting event that was local. For this trip we were scheduled to visit a historical museum, then a tour of the capitol building, and after lunch, we were supposed to break off in groups and go on a scavenger hunt in the Old State Penitentiary. I personally looked forward to the prison most of all after I was told the rumors about some of the inmates still wandered their cells. But it was not to get a chance to talk to ghosts because at the time I was under the assumption such things didn't exist. My intentions were to scare a few incredibly gullible girls who stood in the crowd. I was a bit of a prankster growing up, which inevitably became my downfall.

I looked over to observe Cherry's reaction to the news, for she had not made a peep while everyone else was complaining. Her head bobbed up and down as she tried to stay awake, nearly making the loose stones from the garden fall from underneath her. "Are you alright?" I asked her.

"Yeah, just tired. When are the buses coming?" she whined.

"Mrs. Jones just came out and said the fuel lines froze so the buses are going to be late."

"Again? Don't they have special stuff they put in with it to make sure it doesn't freeze?"

"There is a good chance that froze, too."

Cherry groaned at the news because of how truthful it was. In Idaho, there are often winters so cold that anything used to counter the effects of weather would also freeze over. But the thing was, Murtaugh was close to a lake and there were no buildings large enough to block the weather, so often times one would find the wind and cold to be at least ten times as worse. To add insult to injury, many of the buildings were very old and lacked any materials to support themselves during the harsh weather. When this would happen the only lights would be from old candles and lightning strikes. This was the type of town to live if one wanted to escape the benefits of city life, but it took heavy dedication and wit to counter the many things that could happen.

Because I grew up in this area, I already knew of a few signs to watch out in order to determine the weather. First, if large quantities of seagulls stayed in areas far from a body of water, it would be safe to assume that some rain was coming. The second sign involved the nearby canyon. At all times, no matter what part of Murtaugh you were in, the canyon was always visible. If the weather was bad enough, the canyon would be harder to spot depending on the intensity. As I was talking with Cherry I remembered these two tricks and felt compelled to check for them.

"Do you want to go check the canyon really quickly?" I asked her.

"Yeah, I need to do something to stay awake," she joked.

"Then come with me! You can sleep on the bus."

"Okay."

Cherry and I sprang from our seats and began walking away from the crowd. An old dirt parking lot sat next to the school that held a perfect view of the canyon, along with the froze school buses. We had the opportunity to observe how the severity of the entire situation. Past the beige brick school and some leafless trees was a spot the high school students would commonly use to sneak away from school. There wasn't a clear view of it from the inside of the building and the teachers would never bother to check there. I never understood why it was that anyone to easily hide there, the particular area was out in the open.

As we rounded the corner, we noticed the janitor with a portable heater laying underneath the bus trying to get it working again. Another man was inside the bus resting on the driver's seat waiting for the order to fire up the engine. From the grunting and smacking against the machines, it was easy to tell they were working towards getting all of the children out of the cold weather.

The school administration had a nasty habit of neglecting the safety of the children, even causing children in kindergarten to be nearly riddled with holes after being forced to stay outside during a thick hailstorm. It took several threats of lawsuits, and even some kids threatening to hijack a bus, in order to help make sure no kids were ever left in the weather.

Behind the bus was the perfect view of an abyss. The canyon was trying to build its very own sky to shelter the fish from the cold, making it nearly impossible to see.

“Looks like the weather is pretty bad,” Cherry moaned.

“Yeah, the fog is so thick a jet could get lost in it,” I said.

“No kidding.”

As we spoke our attention was shifted back to the bus. The two guys working on it showed signs of excitement. The janitor jumped from underneath the bus, nearly knocking himself unconscious from getting up too quickly right as the engine roared. The gas lines must have been thawed just enough to get the bus running. If any frozen fluids still remained, the passengers would have to keep their fingers crossed in hopes it wouldn't damage anything during the drive. The route to and from Boise had a single rest area we would likely stop at for bathroom breaks. The rest of the trip was just sitting on a cramped bus just hoping for the other children to be quiet long enough to catch up on sleep.

On the bus stood two rows of leather seats. The third-grade class was ordered to the back of the bus since we were only around for a discount. I didn't mind it much; I never really had many chances to take fun trips anywhere just to simply experience the world. At the time I thought it was nothing more than a fun trip in which the school would corrupt slightly with homework. Well, at least I was with a friend through it all.

Cherry and I picked a spot towards the far back of the bus. The last seat in each seat was smaller than the others, possibly to make room in front for one of the emergency exits. No one, other than the teachers, would bother us back there. Cherry had asked that I take the spot closest to the window so she could catch up on her sleep. I saw how tired she was and done as she wished, sliding the cooler onto my lap as we sat down. As soon as our bodies met the leather she started to snore while her head gently slid to my shoulder. She drooled a little bit, leaving a salty-wet stain on my jacket. Our teacher made the rounds, pointing at each head in order to take attendance. As she approached the blank look on her face etched itself into concern at the sight of Cherry on my shoulder.

“Do you want me to move her?” she asked.

“No she is fine,” I answered.

“Are you sure?”

“She's fine.”

“Alright, I'll be watching you two.”

My teacher knew I didn't get along with many people, and because of

the treatment I received, I wasn't afraid to smack around anyone that tried something. Yet for some reason, no one in that entire town could comprehend that I was nothing more than a big softy if people were kind and respectful. To be honest, at the time I was simply glad at least one person noticed and she held on to me for the entire trip. Being that I was always taller than most people, even while I was growing up, it was nice to meet people that didn't assume I would fit the stereotypes about tall people.

After a near three-hour drive through country roads and interstates that sliced through the mountainous terrain and small cities we finally arrived at the museum. I gently shook Cherry awake so she wouldn't be left behind.

"Hey, we're here," I whispered.

Cherry jumped as if I pulled her from a dream. "Wh... what?" she moaned while slowly observing her surroundings.

"We just got to the museum."

"Oh okay. Thanks for waking me up, did I drool?"

"A little but it's fine."

"Okay," she whispered as she nodded her head.

We both rose from our seats and began moving towards the open door of the bus. I grabbed on to each seat just to pretend it somehow made the line move faster. As Cherry and I made our way onto the parking lot of the museum our teacher, Mrs. Shirley, handed us both an assignment the class was meant to complete. I skimmed through the paper and figured that we were supposed to fill in the blanks of various historical facts by finding the answers inside exhibits in the museum.

"Alright students, for this entire trip both grades will be competing to see which class can get the most points from finding the most answers. The winning class gets a pizza party. Now please be quiet and respectful as you go through the museum," Mrs. Shirley announced.

The fourth-grade teacher, Ms. Jones, appeared as if she wanted to add something. "If you are having trouble finding something, Mrs. Shirley and I will not help you," she told the crowd. Everyone moaned once they heard their teachers wouldn't help them for the assignment. As the moans continued we were lead inside the museum. Most of the other children ignored it, but I remember noticing several eyes being drawn to the rusted statue of Sacagawea holding her child while watching at all that passed her with eyes that desired sleep, standing just outside the glass doors towards the entrance.

Within the next couple hours, we had to find everything, Cherry and I hurried through the exhibits just to finish the sheet. We swept through old photos, preserved animal hides, and some old farming tools just so we could fill out the paperwork. By the end of the two hour period, I believe we managed to find all but two answers before the teachers started making the rounds to gather everyone. A few weeks before the trip, when permission slips were handed out,

Mrs. Shirley threatened to leave people behind if they didn't come around when the buses decided to pull out. Some followed the advice, without any realization the school was too small to get away with such an act.

The next stop was a tour of the capitol building. The only thought that existed in most of our minds was how much it resembled images we would see on television depicting Washington, DC. A tour guide greeted us inside the main lobby and took us through the conference rooms as the children found ways to prop themselves against the walls just to rest their throbbing legs. We didn't care much for how the state senate ran; all we wanted to do was have some lunch and rest for a bit. Thankfully, because of the absence of paperwork at this stop, our wishes came true during the bus ride to a park not too far from our final destination, the Old State Penitentiary.

Cherry and I were more excited about the tour of the Old State Penitentiary than any other aspect of the tour. Something about digging into the dark past of a place made us more at home than anything else. We shared common interests in history and science as if we both grew up with scholars for parents. But instead of the topics buried in expired textbooks, we had a personal favor towards the stuff they don't teach in school. All of the raging stars and distant world that looked like nothing more than specks of glitter in the sky, to history's crazed maniacs and the mysteries that boggle experts; the possibilities of what was out in the world were too vast for school. Textbooks only cover tiny pieces of what is out there, and reading was nothing compared to actually going out and experiencing it all. Even though I believed ghosts were nothing more than legend, I was still interested in reading about them. The Old State Penitentiary was crawling with rumors that the old inmates still resided within the cells.

When we got back on the bus and the engine started, Mrs. Shirley finally mentioned the fact the place was supposedly haunted. Cherry noticed the look on my face after I noticed a few pairs of eyeballs trying to escape their sockets and chuckled under her breath.

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

“Nothing, I just a bit of an idea,” I told her.

“I know that look on your face. It's evil. I like it.”

I couldn't help but laugh at what Cherry was suggesting. “Then you and I should probably stick together,” I laughed.

“Haven't we already been doing that?”

The drive from the park to the prison was short; maybe two minutes at best because we had to wait in the turn lane until traffic decided to ease up just enough to let us pass. At the sight of a large, worn out building barely reserved by local agencies, I had a feeling something would happen. Something about the place felt empty and lifeless.

“Dakota, are you alright?” Cherry asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine. This place just feels weird,"

"Well of course it does. All the bad people who used to be here, all of the things they did. It would make anyone feel a little freaked out."

"No, it's not that. It feels like there is nothing there, but it also feels like something is trying to get my attention."

"Really? That is weird, but maybe it's nothing."

"Yeah, maybe you are right."

"Now come on, this is the last stop."

While Cherry and I spoke the bus finally came to a stop in front of the old prison. Everyone rose from the seats, leaving behind their lunch boxes to mark their spots. My cooler was probably the safest of all of them, it stood out from the rest and because it belonged to my grandfather I would be the first person to bite into the still beating heart of whoever got stupid enough to touch it. Cherry took advantage of it to keep her bullies away so she always stuck as close to me as she could. As we got off the bus and gather in front of the main entrance, she walked closer to me than any other time during this trip. She had me convinced that she was skeptical about the claims of ghosts wandering the halls, but her actions spoke otherwise.

Mrs. Shirley and Ms. Jones guided the group to a large screening room. Most of the kids looked straight ahead, like mindless freaks, but I took the time to observe the new places I went to. The room we were in had a neutral vibe to it. Whoever was here, when the place was still operational, didn't deal with any significant event. It was almost as if everybody was nearly asleep the whole time.

Two gentlemen appeared from a nearby office came out. Based on the various similarities between the two I could tell they were brothers, possibly identical twins. They both wore nearly identical suits, had matching hairstyles and body builds. The only difference I noticed was that their height was off by a few inches. Thankfully identical twins tend to grow into natural variations as they age but sometimes they are subtle and test the mind of those around them.

The two gentlemen stood next to a small projector screen that stood on a thin stand in the middle of the room. One of them held a small gray remote that he taped against the palm of his hand as if he was impatient. Everyone seated themselves on wooden bleachers built into the walls in preparation for a short film that told the stories of some of the old inmates. The two men introduced themselves as Steve and Walter before pressing the play button on the remote to activate a hidden projector. I watched as some of the worst inmates, from insane assassins to crazed widowers, were introduced in the film. Yet for some reason, throughout the course of the film, I began to see things that weren't on the screen. The visions only appeared for brief moments but showed enough to be remembered for a lifetime. I watched as blood would drain from a random victim while the one responsible would just stand back and laugh at the work. For the length of the film, I must have zoned out while the visions

manifested in my mind. Cherry had her hands on my shoulder, trying to shake me back into reality.

"Dakota, are you alright?" she asked.

I honestly didn't know what I felt about the situation. I couldn't remember a time that I saw things that weren't there. So inevitably I had no clue what to say or even feel.

"Yeah, I guess I just got a little sidetracked," I answered while shaking my head back into focus.

"Are you sure? Your eyes looked pale."

"Really? Well, are they normal now?"

Cherry focused on the details of my eyes as if she was trying to help remove something from the surface of my eye. Her eyes scrunched up as if she was trying to read a message inscribed by ants within my corneas.

"They look normal, but that was weird," she said while allowing her eyes to shift into normal shape.

"Alright," I said. I wanted to say more but I noticed the class began to leave without us, teachers included. "Just stick close to me just in case it happens again and I don't notice"

"Yeah sure, but we better get going," she said while grabbing onto my hand and forcing me off of the bleachers so we would lose track of our class.

In front of the pact was one of the brothers, the other must have returned back to the office they came from. I heard from one of the guys in the fourth-grade class that is was Steve who decided to give us the tour of the place after Walter showed some interesting behavior after staring at me. I didn't think it was much at the time, maybe something about me reminded him of some work he forgot. I couldn't tell, I was only nine at the time. A majority of my worries involved whether or not food was going to taste good (my mother was not much of a cook). But regardless of what happened moments before, nothing could have prepared me for what happened during the tour.

The tour seemed to flash by in a matter of moments compared to how much time we actually spent there. Our little flock of children, clueless of the world's true workings, was guided through every inch of the prison; right through general population, through solitary confinement, past old moldy showers, and past old courtyards covered in flowers. As we walked along, I took every chance I could in order to frighten the rest of the class. I used to make them squeal at every gust of wind and scream and every flicker of dust. But as the tour continued, something decided I was in place for one of the most life changing moments I had ever experienced. In some of sort of twisted manner, this incident almost had me executed for a crime that took place nearly fifty years before I was born.

Steve went on describing the purpose of the room as we entered death row and passed by the glass display of the gallows. His words, along with every

other sound in the world started to fade away as I felt a surge of adrenaline coursing through my veins. My body felt as if it was preparing to die, but for people like me, death takes a different toll. But I knew there was trouble once my eyes started moving by themselves as if they were flying to a new destination. I even remember seeing everything around me start to blur as if I was traveling at high speeds before stopping.

When my eyes finally settled, I looked around to see crowds of people I have never seen before staring at me with tears of hatred and sorrow. I did what I could to look at my surroundings just to understand what was happening. I was in a room surrounded by a glass display and spectators as if I was some underwater animal putting on a show. But perhaps what frightened me the most is that I saw a young boy tucked behind the crowds. He was alone, nobody bothered to acknowledge he was there or even act as if he was missing. A break in the crowd of spectators finally revealed that the boy wasn't with anyone. He wasn't even from the same time period. That boy, dressed in a t-shirt and denim jeans and with frozen eyes, was me.

I felt my mouth trying to say something to the boy, but no sound would emerge. My heart began to race as I felt the floor beneath me quickly jerk. Some women in the crowd cried much harder than they probably had before in their lifetimes. I tried one more time to scream myself from this nightmare, but it was no tormenting dream. This was all the dark reality of Idaho's past finding a way to reveal one its most historic events.

But my thoughts quickly disappeared into my bloodstream as my heart raced faster than ever before. The floor beneath me had opened, forcing my body to dangle like a fish on a hook. But as the story goes, something went wrong with the rope. A noose is meant to quickly kill a man by snapping their neck once the floor beneath them disappeared, but the earlier shake had served as a warning for what was to come. I was simply hanging by the rope, slowly losing breath as it shrank my neck. My head was too low in order to see the much of the other me just outside the glass display but tiny glimpses of his scalp showed me I was the only one being killed.

But, just as quickly as it all started, the visions faded. I was back in the hallway, back in my own time, surrounded by the very group that chose to ignore my existence in a rather disturbing time. They all had fear in their eyes as if they knew something was happening to me, they knew I was about to die.

Cherry was perhaps the most frightened of them all.

“Dakota, what happened?” she cried.

I tried my best to catch my breath. My hands were curled as if I was trying to free myself from something. Somehow I took the place of one of the most famous executed criminals in Idaho history, I was almost choked to death in a time way before I was born. I felt everything he felt. I saw everything he saw. I was the killer. Only one idea came to my head that could explain it all, an explanation I had no clue how it became seeded into my mind.

“Somebody is in there,” I shouted, “Somebody is going to get hur...”

I looked into the gallows where my eyes rested a half a century earlier. The man whose final moments I witnessed was still hanging on that rope, this time he was nothing more than a solid shadow. A shadow without a body, or maybe the shadow was the body. It has always been hard to classify the phenomena because much like the minds responsible for their creation they varied with every experience of their own. But before anyone else could see what I saw, that very shadow disappeared.

“Where Dakota?” asked Mrs. Shirley.

There wasn't anything I could say. How was I supposed to tell people that I watched a live execution from the eyes of the criminal just a few moments earlier when the criminal died back in the 1950s. Knowing the morons I was around at the moment and the treatment they would put me through if I spoke about it further, I kept my mouth shut. The tour guide leads us through a couple more rooms before the teachers decided to disband the pack in order to initiate a scavenger hunt. There weren't any more major incidents, just a few shadows that moved on their own and a few whispers too quiet to understand. After the scavenger hunt, we all went home. I tried to tell my mother about what happened, but even she didn't believe what I had to say.

They say that you have to be alone in order to witness the final breaths of Idaho's “Jack the Ripper,” endlessly trying to plead for someone to end his suffering. But after what happened I wouldn't be surprised if people added a legend that told of a much higher voice being heard within the old gallows. Maybe because I chose to share this story, the killer will be able to show himself to those who decide to wander the prison. The group of children I was forced to stick with during the trip were completely oblivious to what happened to me, even Cherry showed a bit of a delay before trying to come to my rescue. Perhaps, because of it, a part of my soul will appear in the same place.

Inevitably I was forced into silence about my experiences; however, my silence didn't have to stay for too long. Two years later I was able to finally learn the identity of the killer. A ghost hunting television show went to the penitentiary to film an episode of their first season and captured an image of the very shadow I saw hanging from the gallows once it was all over. I was even able to finally learn his name.

His name was Raymond Snowden. He was executed after stabbing a woman thirty times, inevitably killing her. The crowd outside the gallows were the woman's family and friends there to watch a killer take his last breaths. A moment in history that proved my sanity and yet at the same time it forever sealed my mind to walk in the shadows.

Chapter 7
Dreams of Time

“That is scary. But that doesn't explain everything else,” said Shandra when I finished the story.

“I know and I apologize. I have a hard time explaining these details to people because there are about three different points that I could say were the influence behind how I got started. But they happened so long ago I barely remember them, other than the stories I have been told.”

“So what does that mean? Are you some sort of angel? Demon? God? Superhero? What?”

I chuckled at Shandra ideas as to what could be used to describe myself.

“Actually the closest would be an unsung superhero of sorts, to be honest,” I joked in response.

“Well tell me. You have caught my interest.”

In response to Shandra's persistence I could not help but feel overwhelmed due to the fact I myself still had very little of an idea about how it all came to be.

“In short, me working with the police and you healing that fast, among many other things, are the result of a time when I was murdered at the age of four. After a family argument of sorts, I was stabbed in the back of the neck. I don't remember much of what happened up to that point or who did it. All I do remember was being granted two alter-egos that brought me back to life and would help me get out of that situation. One of which helped me heal you when

we kissed. The other likes to hunt down criminals and other things masked by the night and fight them off in every way possible if needed."

"What else can you do?"

"Just about anything, really. Come here I will show you."

Shandra followed my lead to the window to the far side of the room. When opened, it showed a direct view of the fogged over and isolated graveyard just across the street. Something about the fog made the area feel like we stood on the outside of the legendary vile vortices; one of twelve locations around the planet where mysterious events often took place, perhaps the most notorious being the Bermuda Triangle.

Many claimed that many more of these zones existed but on much smaller scales and the activity was nowhere as intense, so any response was treated as nothing more than lore. Perhaps this graveyard just happened to be placed much like those since the fog seemed to only cover the graves. Even the plots that were buried by construction crews had been covered by the mysterious fog. Regardless of the conditions, it wasn't different than any other case, since I was the only supernatural authority in this area. Well, I was at least the one that had a direct connection to the other side. Nobody went missing here, I made sure of that.

At that moment it was time to show Shandra one the tricks I learned early in my life. "Fog can be quite creepy when it settles like that, don't you agree?" I asked in reference to what I was about to do.

She had a minor freaked out look on her face, unsure of what I was about to do. Instead of a lengthy explanation, it was best for a simple demonstration. After opening the window I stuck my arm out, palm pointed towards the fog and fingers spread apart. My eyes sealed themselves shut while every thought in my mind flew away in a sudden windstorm. In a moment's notice, the Earth mimicked what I had seen in my mind. A strong wind gust came and cleared the fog surrounding the area, making it appear as the barren graveyard as people preferred. A rather boring and depressing sight for people like me, but comforting for people in a situation much like Shandra. My arm dropped to my side when I turned to face her.

"How did you do that?" she asked with eyes almost hanging from their sockets.

"The same way I can do this," I answered cupping my hands together.

In the graveyard was a series of red rose bushes meant for decoration. They were hardly ever trimmed, and various last minute guests for various gravestones would "borrow" them in an effort to cover the graves of their relatives. In truth the rose, no matter what color, was a symbol for life in itself. A singular flower was enough to send the messages between any two people, yet a bunch only multiplied its significance. For what most men would only do to avoid troubles with their lover was my common gift for the one my eyes feasted upon at the time, often tied with poetic words created just for them. At the time I

felt it was best to show Shandra just this.

Using my abilities, I made a single bright red rose appear as if it bloomed right in the palms of my hands. When really I just allowed for it to fly into my hands. “I can make the most amazing things happen, in the purest of ways, with nothing more than a thought mixed with love,” I explained.

“That is amazing,” said Shandra.

Her smile grew ear-to-ear. Her eyes sparkled like the moonlight dancing off of the waves from a crystal-clear lake. It was obvious that she had never seen anything like it before. I presented the rose to Shandra.

“This is for you,” I smiled smiling.

“But Dakota, we haven't even gone on our first date yet.”

“Well, maybe when my paycheck comes in on Friday we can fix that.”

Shandra took the flower by the stem with careful grace. As our fingers gently touched each other in the transition she leaped forward to give me hug. I could feel that her arms could barely reach around me, slowly squeezing me tighter in order to fix that notion.

“So what is it that you do for a living? Other than the whole paranormal thing,” she asked while her cheek was pressed against my chest.

I could not help but worry if that was a sign of a possible gold digger. A fear that strangled my love life in fear of witnessing similar horrors inflicted upon my idols by jealous significant others. But in hope of it being simple curiosity, I answered in complete truth.

“I actually work three jobs. I get occasional payments from the city when I work a case. But the more solid jobs are working as a voice-over actor and as a writer,” I told her.

“Really? How the heck did you get started on that living by yourself?”

“In short, I made a lot of good impressions at a young age and managed to work a few things out. I did everything I could to separate myself from my parents.”

“Why though?”

The answer was too painful and too confusing for me at the time in order to explain it with spoken word. “I'll show you,” I answered.

I walked back over to my computer to open an internet browser to search for a news article that explained the surface of why I was living alone. Typing the web address for a local talk radio station, I pulled up an article titled, “Local Man arrested for Sexual Assault to a Minor.”

“I have heard about him. But what does that have to do with you?” asked Shandra.

My head fell in embarrassment of the actions I was about to recall. I tried to hide what happened out of fear of the reaction. There were several idiots

in town that would torture any open soul with taunts from a story like that. But something told me I could trust Shandra. Perhaps it was the little girl that made sure we came together that day.

"That man... is my father," I said, "And the child he hurt was my sister. The state put all of the kids he had with my stepmom into foster care."

Shandra froze. She began to see my demons, not the ones that try to rip you apart from the outside. No, only humans and hungry animals do that to their victims. True demons rip you apart from the inside, then take over. I had supernatural assistance from the first two times I died which kept this from happening. But I shouldn't have tried to turn my struggles into a priority above helping Shandra, she was the one I needed to guide so her demons could no longer get to her.

She wrapped her arm around my shoulders to try to console me. "Did they at least let you visit the kids?" she asked.

"No, they didn't actually," I answered.

"Why? You are their brother. You should be allowed to see them."

"I know. But the system started to treat me like I was my father so they made sure I never was seen or heard from them."

"Why? You didn't do anything, right?"

Tears had formed in my eyes once I started to deliver the news. My eyes burned from the salt in tears, turning the whites into bright red. Squeezing my eyes and frown shut I lifted my head so I could smother the emotion, just so I could speak clearly.

"In their eyes, I did something much worse," I said, "I looked them right in the eye and told them that if my father ever came near me, I would kill him."

I opened my eyes so I could see Shandra. A sensation that came over her grew so strong it nearly smacked me across the face. Something about what I said made her very afraid. In retrospect, now I see I reminded her of her father's abusive actions. I could see her entire body shaking.

"You don't mean it did you? You just said it out of anger?" she asked.

"I did mean it. I still do. Regardless of the fact that he was my father, he still hurt someone I cared about. He hurt his own daughter. No matter what happened to me, killing him seemed like the best option for everybody," I answered, "Yes I was angry. I was in a near rage that no one understood, not even people in my family. My own sister, the one who came forward about what my father was doing, used the fact I threatened our own father to torment me. Yet no one seemed to realize my brothers and sisters being taken into foster care on Christmas Day was the part that hurt the worse. I never even had the chance to meet my youngest sister who was about six months old at the time. My mother's side started saying that I shouldn't care about it, which is why I started doing as many jobs I could get my hands on in order to move out of the house.

Hell, the only reason I stayed in Idaho was so I could be near my grandfather who is battling cancer."

Shandra froze. She knew that trying to find the right wire to cut to avoid a possible explosion would be difficult if she spoke the wrong words. Her mind quickly filled with what ifs. What if I hadn't been around to find her? What would have happened if the wars in my family weren't raging on and I didn't know how to help her? What if I hadn't called in the cavalry when her own war waged to the eleventh hour? Too many ideas that nearly coated her hair like sweat from a summer day.

"But I must admit I am somewhat glad this all happened. Otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to help you. If my family had their way, I would not be able to come around when I did. If something were to happen to you, I just don't know," I nearly whispered.

"What would you have done? We hardly knew each other. You probably wouldn't pay much attention to it. Nobody would," she said.

Something about Shandra's belief of isolation reminded me of another girl's isolation that I tried to help. Someone I once knew, but hadn't seen for quite some time.

"That is where you are wrong," I said.

I leaped out my chair and stood in the hallway. There was a secret entrance to the attic, or better known as my ritual room. After discovering a Pagan background in my family line, I started utilizing spiritual methods from several cultures in times of desperation. The door leading to it was accidentally painted shut during renovations before I moved in, but with brute force, the entrance became a hiding spot for supernatural augmentations. Amulets, ritual materials, books, journals, even a few weapons in case of desperation. A custom altar with the storm eye logo I personally designed engraved into the wood overlooked the room by standing against the wall.

I looked for the hidden crease in the ceiling that would reveal the hatch and ladder. A rope dropped down and dangled. Grabbing onto the rope, I pulled it down to reveal an entrance into my own religious site. I turned to face Shandra simply to see if she wanted to see at least one more side of me. "Would you like to see more?" I asked.

"Sure, but what is up there?" she returned.

"I guess one could say that this is where my way of prayer becomes answered."

"What do you mean?"

"Come on, I promise not to start acting like a religious extremist. People like that irritate me."

"Alright..."

Shandra slowly made her way up the ladder. When her head peaked through the hinges of her jaw came loose. She was impressed by how the room

was arranged. Paintings of mythological creatures from different cultures, maps tracking various sightings, a small library of books on various supernatural subjects, and much more filled the room. Here is where I would often be found if I needed time alone; sometimes for meditations, others for a quiet place to think. As I crawled up the ladder once Shandra had scurried to one part of the room, I could tell something caught her eye. A painting of Norse Valkyries riding into battle stood in front of her like a monument to ancient tribes. Yet something about the look on her face didn't make sense.

Her eyes became fixated to one particular Valkyrie in the painting, out of a group of five. I believe her name was Svipul, which was an Old Norse term for change, at least according to online translators. According to several sources, Svipul was supposed to represent how quickly fate can change in the heat of battle. She held a spear pointed towards a warrior with blood dripping from a fresh cut on his neck, possibly signaling others like her that a new warrior would be welcomed to Valhalla. Somehow Shandra felt connected to the piece, almost like she lived it. Perhaps in a sense, she did, but the connection sprung much deeper. Much deeper than I could imagine at the time, something I never could understand at the time, but after the war, anything is possible in the time beyond the point I am able to share this.

“Shandra, is everything alright?” I asked.

“Yeah, it's just... I think I recognize this painting,” she answered.

“Maybe you have seen it in a magazine.”

“No, it's not that. I think I am IN this painting,” Shandra said while pointing towards Svipul. I stood next to her trying to see what she saw, but with very little luck.

An idea of what she meant had yet to make itself known to me. From what I could see, there was nothing in the painting that even resembled Shandra.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“That woman in the painting, the one in the far back, is me!”

I focused on the faces of the riders. Their names were Thrud, Reginleif, Kára, Hildr, and last but definitely not least Svipul. In order, the names meant strength, daughter of gods, the wild one, battle, and change.

Then as if guided by the end of the Valkyrie’s weapons, I observed Svipul in a whole new light. A gorgeous red-headed warrior soaring above a battlefield while riding a golden-winged horse. What I hadn't seen until that moment is that she resembled Shandra in almost precise detail.

“That is interesting,” I said with a tilted head.

“I know it sounds crazy but I swear that Valkyrie is me!” she yelled.

“Maybe. The Norse believed that our souls could be reincarnated. Maybe you are one of the incarnated versions of her soul.”

“I don't know. Is there a way to check?”

I framed my chin between my right thumb and index finger as I sorted through my book collection in my mind. Several books on reincarnation sat amongst these shelves throughout the day, but only a few had methods to actually see an event from a past life experience. It can be a tricky task, especially if the soul had been filtered through the cosmic systems a few times. Newer souls have an easier time unless the life they are in was their first. But it was obvious Shandra was not one of those cases, giving what she wanted to do.

“There are a few ways that it can be done. But some are rather complex if you don't know what you are doing,” I answered.

“Really? Can I try one?”

At the end of Shandra's request, a book came to mind that served the purpose she needed. “I think there might be one way, but it might not let you go that far back,” I said.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

I walked over towards a few large shelves stuffed full of books on various supernatural subjects. Books on dreams, psychic visions, alien visitation in ancient times, just about every legend had a copy of itself on these shelves.

“Astral Projection,” I answered while.

“I didn't think that was real,” said Shandra.

“It is very real, otherwise the military wouldn't have tried to experiment with it back in the seventies.”

“Tried? Did something go wrong?”

“In their eyes, yes. The project got shut down back in 1995 because of very few results. There were successful attempts but those who managed to do it burnt out.”

“What happened to them?”

“The military didn't have enough patience to allow its subjects to properly develop, so many of them simply became too exhausted. Almost like getting sore after the first day of gym.”

Shandra rubbed her forearm after mentioning the pain of gym class. “If it hurts I don't think I want to do it,” she joked.

“Don't worry, I won't put you through that. You might get a bit of a headache at most but it usually goes away in a couple minutes.”

“Okay, I am going to trust you.”

A book on astral projection experiences was peeking out as if someone wanted to make it easier to find. Grabbing onto the binding I could hear the covers sliding against each other, slowly letting loose a breath of relief. I had the books tightly packed into the shelves in order to fit them all.

Opening the book, allowing dust to dance about its business, I skimmed through looking for a refresher on how to properly adjust this session to make

sure Shandra didn't witness any side effects in the process. If she wasn't careful, symptoms of complete body drainage could overwhelm her, or nearly kill her if not controlled. But if she had a strong mind than it should go without any issues.

"Here, I think I may have a way we can put you under without having any problems," I said.

"Put me under? You need drugs in order to do it?" she asked.

"No, that was where the government went wrong. The only drugs we use are what we are born with. We just need to adjust the levels to get you in the right state."

"What state?"

"The only way we can do this without it hurting you. Serenity."

Serenity was one polar extreme of human emotion that could power an astral projection to its full potential without feeling any wear and tear; the other being rage. But true power needed to be sprung from somewhere in the middle. The other two were power boosts when there was a sudden change to trigger fight-or-flight responses. I tried myself to strengthen my abilities in both of the extreme states but my quick temper often went into overdrive when it was needed. Ironically my temper was what allowed me to discover a few tricks. If I taught Shandra through the opposite emotion that sprung my powers, maybe she would have a bit more pleasant time if any abilities emerged from her.

I could see an aura of curiosity dancing around Shandra. She wanted to know how a state of ultimate peace was possible in her time of near peril. "Do you still want to do this?" I asked her.

"I am too curious not to try," she answered.

"That is all I needed to know."

I put the book back in the slot left open. My mind was refreshed with the missing details, slowly converting them into something so easy a newborn infant could understand them. Shandra was ready.

"So what do we need to do?" she asked.

"Well, why don't you just find a place comfortable to rest downstairs. I am going to grab something that will help set you to mind at ease."

"Cool. I am getting a bit tired."

Shandra slowly made her way down the ladder. Silence followed until it was interrupted by the squeaks of spring mattress nearly shouted, making it obvious that she leaped on the king-size bed the moment it came into view. It took me a couple moments in order to realize what happened, but who could blame her?

Instead of grabbing some candles to allow for Shandra to relax, I just ignored the idea altogether and went down the ladder myself. Each step creaked as I slowly moved my feet downward, waiting for the moment that one step finally would snap underneath my weight. With luck, my feet were greeted by

the many arms of the carpet flooring. I reached under the ladder in order to condense it so I could seal away the ceiling until a new study was needed. The rope tried to slither its way just through to allow future access to become much easier.

Once the doorway became cloaked and tucked away in the rest of the ceiling, I thought it was safe to check on Shandra before I moved onto my other task. I slowly walked towards the bedroom, with each step muffled by the carpet no sound could be heard from inside the home. The delicate chirps of birds standing just outside the windows overlooking the backyard were all that could be heard. I stopped at the wide open door that closed away my room and peered inside. Shandra was curled underneath at least five layers of blankets, making her look like a small child who slept with their parents after a horrible nightmare. At most, she stood a couple inches above the five-foot mark on a tape measure and maybe weighed about eighty pounds at most. She was not that big of a girl at the start but lying underneath a blue and white blanket with a picture of a grizzly bear posing on a mountainside, made her look even smaller.

My stature was comparable to of a small adult black bear at the time, giving a rather interesting image of how Shandra and I would look standing together. But to be honest, as most of my relationships have shown, people always left us alone because of our size difference. I never understood why that happened, but somehow it managed to hold back the mountains of crap people tried to cover us with. Not a pleasant sight, but one that quickly faded as the small hill on the bed slowly grew and shrank with every breath she took.

Laying on her right side with each breath she took a slight whistle almost wrote its own tune. Perhaps she had already entered a dream and her speech was trying to reach out from the world inside her head. Dreams can be quite mysterious portals to other times and places just to keep our mind busy as we rested through the night. I was about to put Shandra under a trance that would take her to the last significant moment of her previous incarnations on this Earth. Maybe her dream would do all the work. I didn't have all of my chips placed on that bet though because of what I knew about the phenomena we were trying to study.

Reincarnation is a cosmic recycling system, constantly filtering souls and distributing them all throughout existence. It served as a third option for those who were not yet ready for Heaven and Hell. My theory: the process of the life of the soul begins with the death of a star. Photons traveling all across the cosmos submerge themselves into pools of genetic material slightly altering whatever was present. As the genetic material becomes a living being, the experiences it endures make slight alterations to certain markers in reproductive materials allowing for talents and even altered personalities to pass onto future generations. Those changes are also cataloged inside the human mind. When we pass on our soul restarts the process by altering the genetic material of another living creature by inserting talents, personality, memories, and maybe a few physical attributes. This endlessly repeats itself by the choice of the individual soul. There wasn't any way to further prove my theory, and to be honest much

more would need to be done in order to come to a full understanding of what would truly happen.

In truth, I hoped that if Shandra was truly one of the Valkyrie from Norse mythology, she was disconnected from it. Not because I wanted her to be weak. If anyone fell in love with a Valkyrie, they would be slain in the name of Odin. If Shandra was to ride into battle I would prefer to be her ally, not her target.

Leaning on the door hanging against the wall of the bedroom is where I stood to watch as Shandra slept. Her mind gently drifting into dream, being held back by the lights of the outside world peering into whisper in her ears pulling her away from a long fruitful rest. I carefully walked around the room stopping at both windows to close the curtains. The taps of sliding plastic rings sliding against a gold rail on the second window put out just enough noise to wake up Shandra.

“What is going on?” she moaned.

I crouched next to the bedside with a slight smile to comfort the tired soul. “It's alright. I am just getting it dark for you,” I answered.

“Oh thank you. Sorry about falling asleep.”

“Don't be. Dreams can sometimes help look into the past. Maybe with the thought of looking into your past life, your dreams will do all of the work for us.”

“Kinda like how sometimes dreams show the future?”

“In a way, yes. It takes much more in order to go back in time, but considering what you have been through you will be able to pull it off.”

Silence. Shandra's mind was adjusting back into a slumber so deep it could only be described as something near death. I knew that she was not going to be able to respond to much. Reaching for the nearest hand, I held it in my own and gave a gentle kiss just above the knuckles. As I placed her arm near her chest, Shandra adjusted herself so mark of a kiss lined up just underneath her lips. Before I left the room, I noticed something in her hair reflecting the tiny beam of sunlight that escaped the curtains. I stood to look closer, only to find a tiny spot of red hair untouched by black hair dye. Which could explain why I felt attracted to her since I always had a thing for redheads. Even when I was growing up a pretty redhead always drew my attention.

Cherry was a redhead as well. In retrospect, I could see that a majority of the girls I would ask out, or at least try to ask out, somehow reminded me of Cherry. Yet the raw passion often blurred my vision to many other aspects of the world, for instance, I had forgotten about a special request in order to help a very dear friend. Helping out a potential new lover left me untied to any obligations for healing prayers to give an old friend at least a few more years of life, left my mind at a clear state as I left the bedroom and secluded myself in my office. But not before I whispered, “Goodnight,” to a resting soul.

I didn't worry about what could have happened to Shandra if she was successful in moving her soul into an old vessel, or the body that held her soul before it was filtered into a new one. If her past self-met a violent demise she would return just in time to avoid seeing the damage, like someone blacking out before an impact of a car crash. Biased and different views of the world ignited some of the most widespread genocides in the last five-hundred years, there was a good chance she may have defaulted to reincarnation because of a life cut too short. That kind of default was a typical choice for anyone who died within the first thirty years of their life. By the following morning, I would have a good idea of where to look simply based off of what she remembered from her dream. But I could not just simply wait for her to wake up and tell if our effort was successful. I tried to be patient but during that long of wait, I needed to do something in order to pass the time. Evidence review usually takes up a couple days, so went back to my office to work on that while waiting for my own eyes to bar themselves shut.

My computer had fallen asleep in my absence. I guess it grew bored of waiting. Other than plugging in a digital recorder nothing else was done on this device. I looked on the digital display of the recorder to check progress. Only two of the five recording sessions had copied themselves over the audio software, I had at least two hours left. For the time being, I needed to wait for the process to be completed before looking into any other material. Having multiple software open that was not meant to work together often crashed computers, no matter how powerful the systems. At the time I depended on free software that either came with the devices I used or a few items I found online. My computers often became tangled in its own invisible wires when I attempted to use too much software at the same time, so my options became limited.

I sat down and watched the audio map itself out in front of my eyes. The shades of blue and red which indicated levels of sound burned their image into the software. The blues mapped the tones of silence and the reds showed the intensity of noise. In moments of silence, situations like a ghost hunt were mapped in shades of pink for the low levels of sound that often drove many crazy. Anything too loud would draw itself as pure white.

To pass the time left on the audio recordings I reached for a journal. I didn't log daily events as most people probably do, but when something very important to me happened I tried to write it down in case there came a time where it was needed to bring me back from some sort of condition that erased my mind. Several illnesses ran through both sides of my family, putting myself at a higher risk for just about anything. A few included ailments of the mind that could erase all sense of memory and overall identity. I sometimes worried that something like that would happen to me so I followed up with some suggestions from a few professors on the subject. One was to document the memories most important. The other involved simply listening to music. Both instances allowed the mind to make more copies of memories and distribute them to areas that go unaffected when ailments such as dementia and Alzheimer’s became an issue.

The journal I used was an old marble composition book from my

eighth-grade science class. Hardly any of the pages were used for notes, most of the information I could retain. I have always been heavily interested in science, astronomy was my personal preference of study. But most scientific concepts I understood very well because I was the type of kid that would go home and research anything that caught my interest. Schools have tried for several years to get me to read fiction, but their efforts were pointless. I did not want to read anything unless it either had a real mystery or held some sort of truth behind the subject.

For the journal entry, I reached for a pen and began writing.

"April 24, 2011

"Last night I embarked on my first paranormal investigation over at grandpa's shop. Everything went well and the spirits were very active. But a couple incidents that happened almost want to make me want to keep some information from the client. I know it is not a smart move but hearing about a little boy running around with a chainsaw near your place of business is unsettling for everyone. What lead to the discovery of a chainsaw-wielding toddler seemed like something out of a horror movie. About three hours into the investigation I was conducting an EVP session in the upstairs area the spirits started to spin around me. They acted as if something had frightened them, using an old street sign as an alarm. I don't know what their issue was, but the matter will be kept on the backburner for now while I wait for new evidence. Right now I am sorting through what my equipment caught to see if anything was caught.

"I tried getting started on looking through the evidence this morning but due to yet another spontaneous babysitting job from my aunt, my effort was rendered pointless. I simply do not get why she is so stubborn and willingly dumps her own children off for free babysitting. I would have bailed but my grandfather was around, and his condition makes my aunt's actions simply pathetic. They may be simply visiting grandparents but randomly dropping them off on a cancer patient is not something that is needed. So when she finally returned I immediately left.

"No matter, I have much more important matters to attend to than the actions of my family guided by ill choices. There is someone here who needs me. The girl from school, Shandra, ran into some family troubles of her own. I happened to run into her while at store earlier, but our casual meeting did not stop at a pleasant greet and go. Disguised in her voice a tone of suffering cried out. I knew she was in darkness. But after I saw the burns around her neck it was obvious it was about to consume her.

"I did everything I could in order to help her and thanks to me she is lying in my bed. For the eyes that peer into this, no I do not plan in romancing her other than an occasional kiss, at least for now. If something happens to change it, then I won't reject it. She is a beautiful girl, with a very beautiful soul that will start to emerge now that she is free.

"Speaking of souls, in the time she took shelter here she is now part of

one of my many experiments. She believes that she is one of the Valkyries from the painting in my attic, so I put the idea of jumping through time into her head so she could see for herself. I tried to get her to do it through meditation. But before I could, she had already curled herself under the sheets. It is fine because sleep can trigger what was needed in order to accomplish the trick much quicker. I cannot guarantee success but a woman's mind is much more powerful than a man's, especially if there are stimuli pushing her emotions to the limits. A woman can also be capable of developing telekinetic abilities if pushed far enough. I have always wanted to try to document that type of surge in power, but rather not have myself as a target. I did my best to keep my cool when I would put paranormal abilities to the test in other people, but sometimes the tests required a little scare to jump start what I want to see in action.

"I guess it will be best to wait until the morning.

"Dakota."

By hand my writing could take hours; by keys of the computer, it only took one. However given the tricky nature of computers and those who make them trickier it was best to have a copy of the important stuffed away in our own world. One can never really tell whether or not if their own words would become the only trace of the culture they lived and breathed. Perhaps that was how the ancient world would have felt if it peoples from those ages somehow came back and saw every bit of information our society has gathered on it.

As I thought it would, the recording had a few moments left before it was completely transferred over to my computer. The moments passed and the display on the recorder blinked as a way to let me know it was finished. I took out the patching cable from the ports on the computer and recorder and started to wrap it around four fingers on my hand. Once wrapped I tied it with the remainder and tucked it away in the small cable box near my feet.

A pair of old radio headphones sat just behind the monitor. These cancel out white noise and put emphasis on voices. Padding around ears helped keep outside influences from disturbing any findings. I put on the headphones, isolating my ears into my own virtual world built from my many projects. New residents soon came along to set up shop. Sounds mapped across the monitor screen readied themselves for the discoveries hidden in a place known to me since childhood.

Heavy breathing shreds its way in the beginning. I almost could not help but almost feel humiliated knowing that it was my breathing that took over the recording for the first bit. Moving through the segments filled with self-briefings, I stopped just moments before the old woman screamed at me. The device wasn't recording, so the scream wasn't caught. I could hear the sound of a slight static interference that could come from the camera I had recording at the time.

"Who is out there?" asked my voice.

Something could be heard in the recording. A faint whisper was in the distant background that was impossible to understand. I used my mouse to select

the area I heard the noise and activated a filter to amplify it. But disappointment sets in as it was nothing more than the sound of a mouse playing on the gravel floor came through. A reason for many to be careful if embarking on these journeys was natural forces may interrupt any conversations. Another reason is the strain of sitting long hours behind a computer just to listen to the dead. Somehow the mind tries to keep itself busy, often inducing hallucinations in the process.

My own mind tried doing so throughout an hour of silent recordings. The only voice I could hear was my own as I walked throughout the building the entire investigation. But about two hours through the recordings somebody began to speak just as I settled myself upstairs. From what I could tell at the time was that it sounded a lot like my grandfather's old boss freaking out about something. Stopping the recording I isolated where the software mapped the voice and replayed it. Hector's voice was muffled during the times I replayed that section over and over again in order to make out what he was saying. I was only able to make out the word, “camera.”

Adjusting the options on a filter, I managed to amplify the voice. Hector Johnson, my grandfather's old boss, was now confirmed to still walked around his old home. His voice sounded nearly out of breath; he may have been a smoker but this had a ton of panic. Something was scaring him.

“Dakota, check your camera. Someone is outside,” said Hector.

Moments later another male voice chimed in, “He can't hear us. The others are restless. Your wife is too close to him.”

Tonya Johnson could be heard a bit clearer than the other two voices. “I wasn't sure if we could trust him,” she said.

My recorded voice jumped into the conversation, unaware of what had been spoken. “You know what? How about we play a game?” I asked. A few moments of silence passed as I waited for a response. Nothing.

“Here is what I am going to do, I will ask a question and you will simply respond with a yes or a no. But instead of saying it, I want you to knock. One knock for yes, two for no. If you are wondering why I am asking you to do this, the answer is simple. If you knock, I will have a better chance of actually hearing you. If you find some loose metal nearby to respond with, that would be even better. So, if you're up for it please let me know,” I added.

I went silent again on the recording in order to wait for a response.

“That might help,” said the male voice. A large metallic bang screamed into the night. My clothes adjusted to my body peering into the eyes of the noise. “Now we have your attention,” said the voice.

“So you're alright with it?” I asked, still believing it was a woman I was speaking to on the recording. Another loud bang from the sign blankets the sounds on the software display. The loose metal can be heard vibrating in the background slowly orchestrating gentle swirling winds that panicked at something I couldn't see. Thinking it was a sign of understanding, I said,

“Good.”

Countless voices murmured in the shadows, almost impossible to understand. Something about the motion of the spirits caused interference, canceling out all other noise for the rest of the recording. I skimmed through the audio session in order to find where the interference ended. Exactly forty minutes of pure interference tampered with evidence. There was no chase, no chainsaw-wielding child, no hints to the future, nothing on the interesting events that took place that night. My grandfather would have wanted to see what was caught. But much more was needed to be analyzed.

But Hector's warning could not escape me. He wanted me to see something that was in the view of my camera. Which one I couldn't tell. My first thought was that it could be something on the outside disturbing the spirits, but my cameras didn't have a clear shot. The bottoms of the windows were about twelve feet off the ground. It was hard enough trying to keep whatever could shine through them from interrupting the case.

After checking the rest of the audio recording, nothing else came up. Since photos and now audio was cleared it was time I got down to video. I found the note on my laptop with the timestamp from watching the videos back at my grandparent's house. The video software displaying images right after the white head appeared in frame.

Hours passed as I sat there watching the shaky camera footage. Hours of pausing at every little flicker that seemed out of place. I tried to find more anomalies but most of what I saw on that video could easily be discredited from a paranormal status. Regardless of the many videos posted online, the supernatural activity from horror flicks is not easy to catch. It may be a bit of fantasy for people like me, but it is a simple fact. Spirits have a hard time maintaining a physical state. They are fueled by several environmental factors. Too severe of the activity actually shouldn't have happened at the intensity it happened. Some of the activity may have been fueled by my nerves, but nerves were not enough to fuel the night as I became accustomed to the night.

But then in a shot peering down from the upstairs I noticed something. Something appeared just outside the window for a few frames then disappeared. I clicked just a few moments ahead of the time slot and clicked on a button that showed a rectangle and arrow pointing to the right. This was how to play footage frame by frame if we caught something that simply moved too fast. Click. Click. Click. The view was finally clear enough to see. I magnified the footage to get a closer look at what could have been spooking the “spooks,” so to speak. It was one of the Suits that tried to kill me!

Every question I could think of came rushing through my mind. Why did they stalk my case? What did they want? Why were they stalking me? Just about any thought that burned the minds of hunted innocents being chased by some sociopath flooded my own mind. Then something came to mind that eased fear into rage. Some eyewitnesses claim they had been researching the Suits only to be visited by the very entities moments later. I slowly rolled over to the

window and stood from my chair. As the view to the outside world slowly grew I scanned the area to find anything unusual.

Surprise. Surprise. The black SUV from the day before was parked in the driveway in the graveyard. The clicks of the locks whispered in the distance as one of the Suits stepped out. A couple folders, stacked full of paperwork, sat on the middle console in the vehicle waved as the suit no longer blocked the view until he closed the door. He appeared that he was wanting to say something, yet it was hard to notice any movement on his face.

"Hello, Mr. Frandsen," said a voice in my head.

"Who the hell are you?" I asked with a growl.

"One of many who is interested in what you do."

"What do you want from me?"

"Mr. Frandsen, we want you on our side when the time comes."

"What do you mean?"

"A war is coming. All that hope to survive need to pick a side."

"Who is fighting?

"Everyone and no one."

A black fog grew from the SUV and engulfed it. Moments later the fog had dissipated with the SUV. Disappearing before my eyes, the suits appeared as if they never were there at all. No trace of their presence could be seen. Were the suits phantom killers or guardians cloaked as demons? I couldn't tell at the time, yet my options for finding out had not fully existed. Nobody knew exactly who they were or where they came from. As I noticed from my first encounter, details hinted at an extraterrestrial origin but I had very little evidence to go on in order to make any conclusions.

Another thing that didn't add up was why the Suits intervened on a ghost hunt. Except for the final moments of my encounter with the small boy that crossed over, there was no indication of UFO phenomena. Sometimes the Suits would appear after someone would report creatures similar in nature to the infamous Loch Ness Monster, but never ghosts. I tried to piece together what it was that they were after, with the only major clue came from something that technically didn't exist.

"A war is coming. All that hope to survive need to pick a side."

Those words rang through my mind on a loop. Every possible interpretation of the phrase rang through my mind in an attempt to foresee the possible future. But something had blocked me, something that came from inside of me. The voice of the older woman who served as a spirit guide emerged to clear it up.

"They want you to fight for them," she whispered before fading away.

It was surprisingly obvious. The Suits, or at least whoever they work for, wanted me to fight with them. Probably to find a way to extract my DNA as

a way to experiment on how to transfer my abilities to the modern soldier. Just about any major government facility in any country would try to do the same. I honestly didn't blame them for researching this phenomenon. The things that could be done were pretty cool and thought to provoke for those who bothered with the concepts.

But the problem was the overuse of military applications. Higher-ups in military and overall government in the United States have a nasty reputation of treating their subjects like machines. They believed that it was easy to rebuild or simply replace people. They foolishly accepted supernatural abilities as machines which would often lead to great amounts of damage to the subjects. It was likely that I was being turned into the focus of further studies but somehow fit in a category of people that could take whatever they could fire at us. Otherwise, the Suits wouldn't be studying me like a scientist would study a new species in its natural habitat before putting it in a cage. At the moment it was best that I simply kept my eyes open for more sightings of these entities. If they wanted me to join them there was a possibility that I could find evidence of what was coming. Perhaps even speaking with a few of my more gifted psychic colleagues for their insight.

I sat back in my chair and rolled back towards the computer. The time on the display towards the bottom right side of the screen read, “8:21 p.m.” Time seemed to rush itself that night. By many methods this always time's way of warning me something was coming and soon. It was truly scary when this happened, but I was quick to deduce where the conflict was to originate. The existence of variables involving supernatural elements made it hard to tell what trouble was coming. In memory of the new risks, I could not help but glance towards my bedroom door. Shandra was a welcomed risk. It would be easy for her to get caught in the crossfire by staying but this was obviously where she needed to be. Only time would be able to tell what she was needed for.

I could have wasted my time trying to figure it out, but the mere thought of what could happen would cloud any resources I could use to find the answer. Keeping my attention on other ventures was probably for the best until more answers revealed themselves. So after three hours of more evidence review, I shut down my computers and laid down on the cot. Slowly my eyes shut allowing my mind to enter into dream.

Every detail of the dream from that night was easy. The dream this time dropped me out in the desert. Small hints of sage brush and cacti were randomly distributed in the yellow sands. A small breeze allowed the sand to run and play like small children. A small group of lizards and snakes scurried around my feet as if they welcomed me into their home. In a sudden second, they stopped moving as if frozen by something. A trumpet sound rang through the sky, frightening the animals. Tiny holes grew in the ground from where the reptiles burrowed. As the trumpet blew a large hallway rose from the ground and closed me inside. Eroded bricks lined the hallway that seemed to reach past the horizon. With no other options to move, I walked down the path. Familiar shapes begin to draw themselves into the ancient bricks with each step I took.

As I journeyed farther and farther, the screams of a woman in fear filled the hallway. My blood grows fur and claws in response to someone in need. I always believed in four tools to combat danger; serene, rage, humane, and feral. Anyone could pick two in order to fight off a new struggle. My favorite choices were the humane feral. A way to channel animal strength, but still be able to help the attacked. Those choices often reflected on my dreams and this was no different.

When the screams grew louder my footwork grew in speed. The only thing I knew was the simple fact I was getting closer. The rush of a mad wind blew past my ears, slowly destroying the ancient hallways and the rest of the desert as I moved forward. My feet shook the ground creating an earthquake that added to the destruction. The hallway crumbled behind me as I continued forward.

As I reached the end I notice the outline of a small woman lying in a large bed through dancing shadows that spun around her. The rattles of chains violently shook and smacked against the bed as the woman tried to fend off her attackers.

A youthful voice rang in my ears screaming, “Daddy help Mommy!”

In the final moments, I let out a Viking war cry to ready the attackers for an imminent death. But to only be stunned by the shadows disappearing with no notice.

The cries of the woman continued as if she was still being harmed by unseen forces. As I stared, watching her body shake violently without any idea of how to help, my rage begins to set. I begin to notice more details, such as the woman bound by chains was no random face. It was Shandra, wrapped in a peasant's tunic from ancient Egypt. Her violent shakes loosened the clothing, revealing much more to her than I had hoped. Her head jerked side-to-side almost controlling the night scene. Each time her head threw itself into the bed, the scene around us shifted into a new form. We no longer were stuck in the ancient structure. We were now safe in my bedroom.

I could not tell if the dream was still happening. Even though the attackers and chains were gone, Shandra continued to shake in a frightened manner.

“Shandra,” I shouted rushing to her side, “Shandra wake up!” She jerked herself upward at the sound of my voice.

“Oh my god, Dakota!” she shrieked. Before I knew it Shandra wrapped her arms around me. A cold winter's shiver took over her body.

“It's okay. It was nothing more than a dream.”

“No, it wasn't. It was real. It was too real. Please don't go.”

She slowly tightened her arms to hold me close to her. I could feel the blood in her veins nearly coming to a stop as I wrapped my arms around her. We slowly lied back on the bed. Shandra's head slowly fell against my chest as her

hair covered my shoulder.

"I won't ever go; I will always be around when you need me," I whispered.

"What if something happens to you?"

"Shandra, if you ever need me and I am not there, look to the stars. My mind has always been there, so it is only a matter of time before my body decides to join."

I noticed a slight smile in the darkness grow on her face as she drifted to sleep once again. I didn't want to disturb her, so I allowed myself to fall asleep right next to her as I gently stroked her hair. As my eyes closed I could see the image of our little girl crawling on the bed to join us.

"Goodnight," Olivia whispered.

"Goodnight," Shandra and I responded as if in tune.

It must have been close to midnight when the dreams began to merge with reality that night. For me, it was a common occurrence for my dreams to leak into the physical world, but I never could find out why. I could never find out why my own mind often broke boundaries set by mainstream understandings. What happened that night was probably one of my worst episodes now that I think about it. The details engraved into the walls of the ancient-looking structure from my dream nearly replicated the upstairs hallway of my home but stretched out. Any decorations in that particular part of my home would be separated by what seemed to be several miles. To fill the empty gaps, images from events I didn't recognize would draw themselves in the sands. These images almost could almost write an endless series of books to dictate the progress of time.

As for Shandra and I, we enjoyed the moments of starlight that flickered in the sky just barely illuminating the Earth while the moon was absent. At times I would awake for just a moment to check if the dreams would continue on, but meeting the same conclusion each time. What was happening, what has happened, was in fact reality. A blissful thought for someone like me, who had always been stuck with the label of "just friends" by several of the women I tried to meet.

But none of it mattered. Being in a relationship didn't affect me much growing up, probably because I was raised to know the difference between lust and love. There are few that earned my hands as well as my heart. They were the ones that were genuine. Ones who realized that sex would only complicate life in itself if not honored by a sacred bond. People who owned this reality would blindly blame the other gender for the faults of corrupt lovers. But in truth people of all genders had a factor in making the ideals of love to become a lost art, even forcing Cupid himself to retire. My struggle has been to prove that I was not like the foolish, yet my satisfaction came when I knew at least one person saw that in me. During my earlier years as a paranormal investigator I had one person who saw it that way, and in that moment her head laid on my

chest. Based on simply how comfortable she looked, I must have felt like a giant teddy bear to her.

Morning broke free. The inconvenient greeting of sunlight personally yanking the covers from the countless bodies thus carrying them away from a wonderful night. Beams of light took their time to scan the bodies that laid in my bed that morning. As they inched up the sheets, my eyes began to open themselves to meet the day. I was disoriented as my mind painfully woke itself to meet the demands of everything outside of my body. I leaned my head forward just enough to get a look around. My memory of what happened over the course of the night was vague. Clues such as a dent in the wall just behind door and the signs of forced entry around the hinges put the proper images in my mind. The dream played itself over again in my mind. The ancient hall crumbling with each step I took. The shadows taunting a bound woman. My daughter crying out for her father to rescue her mother. Every detail returned to form an even better image than it was created.

My thoughts were interrupted by dark, dancing hair that spread across my chest. Shandra was waking up from her slumber. Gentle moans playfully singing to welcome herself to the morning ways.

“Morning, Dakota,” she moaned.

“Morning. How did you sleep?” I asked her.

“Better after you came in.”

“Good. I am glad I could help.”

Shandra opened up her eyes to stare into mine. “So what happened last night?” she wondered.

“What do you remember?”

“Not much. I remember getting trapped by these weird shadows. Then after a little girl cried out, you came in and the shadows disappeared.”

“That's weird. I remember seeing all of that.”

“Weird for you? That is a little ironic coming from someone like you.”

“Yeah. But things have been changing lately so anything is possible.”

“So what does it mean?”

“Usually means that something important is coming.”

“Like our daughter?”

I couldn't believe it. Shandra had confirmed it all on her own accord. Until that very moment, Olivia had tried to hide it from the both of us while secretly uniting our paths. Even though the day my world collided with Shandra's technically revealed everything. My head became filled with questions and theories on why it all was happening, making my voice freeze itself in place.

“Do you think she had anything to do with it?” asked Shandra.

“For the dream? No, but I do think she is a big part of it.”

“This is all too confusing. First, she saves my life, but she never tells me why she did it.”

“Really? Is that how you met her?”

“I don't really want to talk about it right now.”

“I get it. But, if it does make things easier, she did save me as well...”

Before I could finish, the roar of an empty stomach startled both of us. We both squeezed our eyes shut and laughed at the intrusion. Shandra's laugh was nearly as contagious as the laughter of a baby. Each peak of her voice massaged my heart to ease.

“I am so sorry,” Shandra blushed.

“Don't be. How about I go make us some breakfast and then we will talk about it?”

“Yeah, I would like that. What is on the menu?”

“How about some pancakes?”

“I'd love some.”

“Cool. Then how about I bring it back up so you and I can have breakfast in bed?”

“I'd like that.”

I leaned forward to give Shandra a kiss. The sweet taste of an angel's breath awoke my body for the morning duties when all it wanted to do was simply lay in that bed. Moments passed before our lips decided it was enough, gently pulling us apart. Before I could leave, Shandra sneaked one last peck to my lips as a sign of gratitude towards my care for her. I have always wondered if she was simply thanking me, or if she felt that I was only doing this because I felt sympathetic of her misfortune. In truth, I guess I did feel bad for her, but as long as she was still the kind soul she was when we met, it would all be the same.

But the growing histories between us signaled that no matter what we decided to do, something was coming for us. It was obvious that the times before Shandra and I crossed paths might have held clues. Clues that could unveil the mysterious origins of our baby girl. But the information was clouded around dark memories that are hard for most people to recite for the less educated. Thankfully some delicious comfort food is enough to distract them from what is holding them back.

As I got up from the mattress, a small wave rippled through the bedspreads nearly launching Shandra. Two slight giggles filled the room. One came from Shandra and the other from an invisible source. It wasn't from Olivia, the tone was deeper than a small child. Perhaps it was just another spirit visiting from the nearby graveyard.

I exited the bedroom and walked down the stairs. With each step I took, I went closer to the main room, which was divided into three by the changes in

the flooring. The living room had soft, gray carpet. The dining room and kitchen had hardwood tiles to make things easier to clean in the event of a spill. Each step I took echoed as if the house was much larger in size but empty.

I quickly walked into the kitchen and sorted through the pots and pans, tucked away in the bottom cupboards, to find what I needed. The handle of a large black skillet almost fell into my hand. I pulled it out from the cupboard. At the sight of a departing friend, the other pans tried to fall out in unison. I quickly shut the cupboard door to evade a noisy mess.

“You know, this is how I always thought our life would be like if we had the chance,” whispered a female voice from behind me.

Something about this voice brought an all too familiar sense. It was as if something I forgot was now staring me in the face with angry eyes.

“What? You don't remember me?” the voice asked, “I guess a few things have changed since the last time we saw each other.”

As the voice continued to speak my mind came closer to identifying the source. Whoever was speaking had obviously known me from somewhere. I needed to find out where though.

“Who's there?” I asked.

“Gimme a second, Koda,” she replied.

As I turned to face the voice, I noticed a blurry image began to manifest right in front of me. When the image became clear it became obvious that the identity of the woman trying to talk to me was, in fact, someone I nearly was forgotten. It was my dear friend Cherry.

“Cherry. It is good to see you,” I said.

“It is good to see you too. Even though I was hoping for more a favorable reunion,” she joked.

“You and me both. So how are you feeling?”

“Better now. The light wouldn't come 'til I got a chance to see you.”

“Why?”

“So I could let you know that I was gone.”

“Are you going to be okay?”

“Yeah, I'll be fine. But I won't be gone for long. We were born from the same star. Even Shandra was there when we arrived on this world.”

A bright, white light grew from out of the window that readied itself to carry away Cherry's soul. We both knew time was limited. “Well I hope that you find peace in whatever lies ahead for you,” I said.

“Thank you,” she responded.

As she walked over to the light. She paused for just a brief moment to say, “You know, I have always liked the name Olivia,” before disappearing. At

the time I didn't think much of it, but I realized exactly what she met after I gave some thought. She was to be incarnated into my own daughter.

Reincarnation was a mysterious force. It was hard to tell where souls would go, but the only thing that was certain was that souls came from solar flares and lightning. Many can tell if they had more than a few runs on a world based on how much they understood. But until there was a way to track the soul, it was nearly impossible to understand the entire process. The way people even came close to understanding the supernatural world, in general, was the modern equivalent of how ancient philosophers came to their conclusions, through thought and reasoning. It never did get the whole picture, but one has to admit that it gets pretty dang close if done right.

But if I stood there just thinking about what happened, I would never fulfill my proposal of breakfast in bed. Olivia/Cherry could wait until the day I got to hold her in my arms. But Shandra needed me now. So snapping back into focus I hurried and grabbed some pancake mix out of the freezer and started cooking. About ten minutes later, I finished cooking a stack of six pancakes for Shandra and me to split. I dug out some plates, glasses, and utensils from the top cupboards and arranged them in the appropriate order. For the final touch, I filled the glasses with some orange juice to help us wake up for the morning.

Once the meal was prepared I grabbed the edges of the tray and made my way up the stairs. The meal tried to sway side-to-side as I tried to maneuver the tight stairway. But the determination of my cause helped still my hands as I walked back into my bedroom.

“Pancakes and some orange juice, my lady,” I announced in a butler impression. Shandra who had been lying in wait sat up with an amused look on her face.

“Oh, why thank you my dear!” she squeaked in a phony English accent.

I couldn't help but smile at the gesture. A woman that had a sense of humor automatically became several times more attractive. I couldn't help but giggle as I set the tray right in front of her. She immediately dug into the food, before I managed to sit, as if she had been starved for days.

“Looks like you have quite an appetite,” I joked, “Are they good at least?”

“Yes, these are delicious,” she said after swallowing a bite a bit too large for her to handle.

“Good.”

“So are you ready to talk about how you met Olivia?”

“Yeah, just give me a sec.”

Shandra held up her index finger to signal a pause in her thinking. With each movement of her lower jaw, the gears in her mind clinked against each other in an effort to produce a way to word her experience. When she swallowed, her hand dropped and smacked the bed as the story tried to sprout

from her lips.

"Well it started when my mom met my dad after he got back from the war just after I turned thirteen," she sighed, "He got really violent with me and my mom. I started blaming myself for everything that would happen and I just had enough."

Something told me Shandra did not want to continue. That same something also told me the rest of the story.

"Let me guess, you tried to hang yourself but something made you stop before you'd do it," I said.

"Yeah! Then this bright blue light surrounded me. That was when I saw Olivia for the first time. Ever since then I see her at the most random times, but lately, I have been seeing her around you."

"That pretty much describes how I met her."

"Yeah well until recently she has been freaking me out! Every time I tried asking her about where she is from her either giggles or disappears."

A playful, childish giggle surrounded the room. "See what I mean?" Shandra asked.

"Yeah I see," I answered, "Good to know now that our child is slightly evil."

I rested my hand on her shoulder and locked my eyes to her before she could continue. "But obviously whatever is coming needed her to bring us together. Since that has happened we will be able to find out what is going on," I said.

"You think?"

"Yes. Whatever happens, we will take it on together."

For the next few weeks, I always tried to at least remind Shandra every day of the promise I made to her. At times the tone of her voice indicated she would be a bit annoyed, but regardless of how she felt I made sure to stick with my word. Somehow that managed to keep us both at peace no matter where we went.

At school word spread around about our weekend adventures, eventually spreading that we had also become lovers because of it. Idiots in the hallways would try to spread about how Shandra and I would share intimacy almost every night when in truth all we really did was kiss. We tried to hint at the truth but hardly anyone listened. Even our own friends would come together to gossip about every step Shandra and I took hand-in-hand. We couldn't even enjoy a good movie the night we scheduled to finally be alone without having at least one person squeal like a crazed fan.

For the movie, Shandra picked a science fiction romance flick titled, "Death Is Not The End." Little did she know at the time that I personally wrote the script for the movie. But once my name appeared in the credits, she took a

new interest in my work, even offering up help where she could. She would even help out with minor tasks around the house, even though she never had to in the first place. She simply just wanted to do it for me because of how much I had done for her. But out of guilt I often helped her out with what she was working on. I kept telling her, at first that she didn't have to do it. But she insisted so I let her do what she wanted. Somehow she was happy about it, which made me feel better when it was time for her to go back home. But if the time came, she was always welcome to return.

In the time this all was happening, I delivered the results of the ghost hunt to my grandfather while slowly working on building a relationship with Shandra. Our knowledge of own existence grew on a daily basis without a quarrel.

Times were pleasant, the Suits didn't come around to bug us and the world just seemed like a calmer place. In honor of our time together, Shandra became an official member of my team, which lead to a slight growth in cases for the next couple months. The following July, Shandra had approached me with a case that began to test the waters between us. It wasn't her fault, perhaps part of the blame was on me because of the way I acted.

This case involved utilizing abilities I had yet to master, and it crossed many boundaries. Don't get me wrong, I was happy that she was on the lookout for more work in order to help people. But this case forced things to change and little did I know, it would be the final stroke of the match needed to get the war started. It also leads to the biggest mistake I ever made over the course of my career.

Chapter 8
Saving the Old Flame

July 17, 2011

The day the town drank its own blood. I remember that day perhaps better than the rest of lead up to the war. It started out as a typical summer day as I worked in my office, occasionally stopping to answer a text message from Shandra. She had been talking with a friend going through a rough patch and was relaying small bits back to me so I could help. I tried offering up bits of advice to help the cause, but it came to a stop once I received a text message that read, “Please call me.” I pressed the Send button on my phone and waited. The phone rang three times before somebody finally answered.

“Hello,” answered Shandra.

“Hey, it's me. What's going on over there?” I asked.

“Listen, I think I got us a case. But I am not sure about what is happening.”

“Okay, just tell me what you know and we will go from there.”

“Alright,” she whispered, “A friend of mine has been looking for her sister who was kidnapped a couple weeks ago. Police have come up with nothing at all and are coming close to calling off the search.”

“That is not good. But it has nothing to do with what I do.”

“I know, I know. But look I was thinking we could do something to help out.”

“Shandra, if you're talking about using me to look into it, you have to

remember there are things that can go terribly wrong in the process."

"I know, but please, Dakota, we have to do something to help. I can't just hold back everything knowing that there is a way to help people when all else fails."

"She is right you know," whispered my Light Hunter. They were both right in their own ways. Something needed to be done and I had the resources to do it. Even though, everything I knew about the situation up to that point broke one of biggest rules about my vigilante actions. The rules to make my involvement seem like nothing more than a wrong place at the wrong time situation. My head dropped in disbelief of what I was about to say.

"Alright, I will see what I can do. But we all need to meet in person."

"I kinda figured. We are in Lincoln Park, just across the street from the mall."

"Okay, I'll be there as soon as I can."

I locked my phone and nearly slammed it against my desk. Even though she didn't know it at the time Shandra had set me up for a huge failure. When dealing with someone going through a tough situation, usually ending up in death, it was too easy to read the situation wrong and risk an innocent life. People like myself who have psychic influences may receive more information from our surroundings than average people, but we are still prone to human error. If we are asked to find someone, we may misinterpret what information we receive and relay it back to the client. This would only ruin our credibility and could ruin a case. That is why a psychic trying to use their gift for profit, without finding a way to cover their ass, will only lead to the most humiliating situations if they are not careful.

I was not afraid to offer my psychic readings to the public, but I swore to stay away from the life-or-death stories the public could thrust upon me. Simply knowing the danger was enough to obscure the images I would receive, thus compromising the case. But in the memory of how dark the world seemed to become on a daily basis, I mustered enough tolerance of the inconvenience, so I could head out ready for the fight. When Shandra told me what the situation was I had a feeling it wasn't going to come to a peaceful end.

I rose from my office chair and stormed downstairs with my cell phone slowly sliding into my side pocket. There was a fight coming and I needed to be ready. My counterparts rose from the ground in concern of my coming actions. "What do you two want?" I asked them.

"It is probably for the best that you don't get frustrated at Shandra. She is only trying to help out a friend," answered my Light Hunter.

"I know. There is just too much at stake for this case."

"You are right. But there is still too much you don't know."

"And what is it that I don't know?"

"How about the fucking fact that the friend is Brianna?" interrupted my

Shadow Hunter.

Brianna, that was a name I hadn't heard in a while. The frozen look on my face gave away my thoughts. “Yes, that Brianna. It was her sister that was taken. I checked up on the situation when Shandra started texting you, and I am afraid time is running short,” said my Light Hunter.

“Then I guess we need to get going,” I replied.

My counterparts fused themselves in order to join my body. I was going to need all of the powers at my disposal if I was going to find Brianna's sister. Hearing her name only angered me more but not because I was nearly being forced into helping her. It was because of the history between us.

Brianna was my ex-girlfriend from back in the eighth grade. The relationship started shortly after she broke up with a buddy of mine that was verbally abusive to her. Long story short, I came into give her a shoulder and somehow it translated that I wanted to date her. At first, I was blindsided but after some thought, I decided to go through with it just to see where it would lead. Her sister Jessica, who was about a year older than us, seemed more interested in the relationship than Brianna. She even was supportive when I decided to look into other venues to explore when Brianna tried to keep me by her side for “private” ventures. Inevitably, this leads to a huge breakup. I thought I could work things out so that Jessica and I could still hang out but Jessica thought it was best for her to be there for her sister.

I hadn't heard from either one since, except for an occasional wave when we happened to see each other in public. That was all we heard of each other for the longest time. Some days I did miss them, but life made sure to keep us apart as much as possible. Perhaps the separation and longing for a much simpler time were to bring me to that moment in time. A time when fate was brought by the very spirits of the past. Time-travel became a part of my story in many forms, this was one of them.

It becomes a part of everyone's rise when the unfinished business between the grace of times resurfaces. It is the time when hidden loves become apparent, the unknown respects of leaders are revealed, and so much more started to bloom like black roses planted in graves. An image of death held a dark but beautiful truth of the world. The rose, the very flower of life itself, held many images in its color. The reds and whites show the secrets of affections. The blacks, which grow darker after every bloom, are said to show the images of death. But I prefer to think of it as something much deeper. The black rose shows how slow pain takes to be tucked away in the darkness, only to be seen when it mirrors the moonlight.

As I got into the car, the roads clear a path for what became a demon march. I did not care for traffic regulations as I sped towards the mall at 90 miles an hour. Everything came close to becoming a blurred mist engulfing the world. Nothing was able to stop me. Something about the potential of this case drove my animal nature. I could feel my teeth shifting and sharpening themselves into small knives as if I was a victim of lycanthropy, an ancient

Greece medical term for human-animal transformation. The beast from inside was trying to tear through my skin. Something I tried to keep caged inside but didn't lock in case he was needed.

Once the mall came into view, my car slowed down to avoid missing the place I needed to be. Both Shandra and Brianna were shorter girls making them harder to spot. I came to a near stop and allowed my car to drift on nothing more than momentum so I could scan the park. Every blade of grass, every leaf of each tree almost swayed in unison. They wanted me to see something. I found a parking spot about thirty feet from a duck pond. Three mallards swam in circles without a care of the world as I searched for perhaps the two most influential women in my life. The sound of the car boom nearly slamming singled the winds to send a ripple through the grass. It flowed through the grass like it was building a highway to my destination. My daughter materializes next to me and grabbed my hand.

"Daddy, you need to do this," she said.

"I know kiddo. Just do me a favor."

"What?"

"If it happens, please, don't watch."

"Daddy, don't worry. I already know what is going to happen."

"Does it have a happy ending?"

"No, it is very scary."

"But you aren't going to tell me anything to help out?"

"I can't. It is a rule I was given by the person that showed me how to come back."

"Fine. So do you know where your mother is?"

"Follow the wind."

Olivia's body broke apart into thousands of weightless pieces carried away by the growing winds. Each step I took scared the dancing grass blades, moving it forward through small hills and dips in the land. In the distance, two large oak trees and a circle of rose bushes sheltered two masses of girl's clothing huddled together with just a bit of skin showing through gaps in their long flowing hair. Shades of black nearly blended them into the shadows. As I walked closer more details revealing the identities of the mass. Shandra and Brianna laid together, skin turned red from the boiling tears in their eyes. Faint demons swirled around them, taunting them with the dark truths. It was obvious I was walking into something with dark energy. A life was at risk, and inhabitants of a soul's Hell took advantage of the opportunity to bring the worse.

Standing just above the weeping souls, they were oblivious to my presence. So I kneeled just in front of them as the winds grew silent. The sunlight peered through the cracks of a rogue cloud, making it seem to only shine on me.

“Hello, Brianna. It has been a while,” I whispered. The cries from both girls come to a still.

“Dakota. What... are you doing here?” asked Brianna through choked tears.

“Shandra told me I needed to come by to help you out.”

“But what can you do?”

“A few things.”

Shandra wiped just underneath eyes to clear up her tears. “Brianna,” she whispered, “You need to let him help you. He can do things that no other person can.”

“What does she mean, Dakota?”

I turned my attention towards Brianna as I stood on one knee, slowly bracing my arm against my leg. “Do you remember why we broke up?” I asked.

“You kept saying that you had all of these powers and I said you needed to be medicated.”

“Let's just say I wasn't telling the whole truth and what I kept from you has gotten stronger.”

“I don't care anymore. Can you find Jessica?”

“Stick out your hands and we'll see.”

Brianna gently rose from Shandra's shoulder and exposed her hands outward. I grabbed her hand and focused my energy on what she knew. An electric shock started to build a vision in my mind's eye. Something about helping an old flame struck sparks as if from a blacksmith's anvil. It was an emergency override in case someone tried to hide crucial details. Brianna was not wanting to admit something was happening causing her mind to try hiding the truth from the outside. In time I start seeing the instance she found out about her sister. The image became clear and seemed to offer a peek through Brianna's own eyes.

The images I saw were clear as day. Every detail was as obvious as it was when it was noted in Brianna's mind, except with an absence of color. Everything in sight was black and white. She was just released from Canyon Falls High School, my school's rival, and was searching for her sister after they had finished with a day in summer school. Thinking that Jessica may have been waiting outside near her car, Brianna proceeded to walk outside to the school parking lot.

Jessica had parked away from the campus to avoid crashing because of a negligent classmate. A smart move on her part. Brianna had left through a side entrance of the school. She looked around, silently noting her surroundings when her sister finally came into view. Jessica waved towards her sister showing where the ride home was hidden.

But as Jessica's hand fell to her side, a skinny man of average height in

a black hood and jeans took a needle and put it into her neck injecting some kind of drug to make her weak. Brianna freaked out, dropping her stuff from school on the sidewalk as she ran to help her sister. Jessica was hauled and thrown into a large black van as it sped off. In the final moments of pure chance, Brianna sees and remembers the license plate and calls the police. The vision fades and my sight returned to the physical world.

"The license plate you saw was J-9-3-6-I-G-D, right?" I asked.

"How did you..."

"No time to explain," I interrupted, "Who is the officer that responded?"

"Jerome, why?"

I closed my eyes in disbelief. Jerome and I seemed to only cross paths when the living made stupid ass mistakes. It was likely this case didn't have supernatural involvement, but heavy storm clouds carrying every ghost hunter's gift suggested that was about to change. The gift of lightning.

It is how souls move through worlds and was the power source for those of us who are gifted. I knew that if I showed up inside the police station to ask a few questions, I would be given the runaround so they could keep the chances of vigilante justice low. But this case was going nowhere and I had resources to trace how it all happened. It is often the last resort for cops to turn to psychic advisers but time was of the essence. I needed to go immediately.

"I think I might be able to pull some strings to get her back," I said.

"I don't care what you do, just get her back," cried Brianna.

"Will do."

As I started to walk back to my car I felt someone grab the back of my shirt. The sound of heavy breaths against my shirt and smell of salty waterfalls of tears made it obvious Something was bothering her as if she was connected to the case somehow.

"Dakota, please be careful," she pleaded.

"Shandra, don't worry. We already know that I make it out of this alive. Our daughter is enough proof."

"No, you don't understand. About two years ago a friend of mine was taken, almost exactly like the way Jessica was taken."

"What happened to her?"

Shandra's cries attempted to burst from her body. She tried her hardest to hold it back, but the dam walls built in her eyes slowly disintegrated.

"About a week later they found her body. Whoever... they..." she said as her words were clouded in tearful grunts.

It was impossible to understand what she was saying. Under the horror of what happened, Shandra collapsed to her knees. I hurried to catch her,

allowing her to slide into my arms. She continued to cry in my arms, trying so hard to wrap her arms around me. “Please don't do this,” she cried.

“I have to do this. There are still many things about me you don't know yet.”

“Please, Dakota. It is too dangerous.”

As I gently placed my hand on the back Shandra's head, I focused my energy on getting into her memories. She didn't want to talk about what happened, but she wanted me to know what had happened. There was a time she told me that I could to get inside her head bugged her, but she acknowledged there would come times when I needed to dig. It was safe to bet that this fell into those guidelines.

I closed my eyes for just a moment. Because my relationship with Shandra was strong, I was able to receive visions in more detail than I could from almost any other source. With Brianna, I could only see things in black and white with no sound. This time every detail was in full color, and the sound was clear. In my mind's eye, the vision started to play from Shandra's perspective.

She sat in a room at a police station, in a nearby town, next to her mother. An officer walks in with a yellow folder full of pictures and sits at the desk just in front of Shandra. Shandra focuses on the officer's face once he sat down. It was Officer Cortez. “Thank you two for coming,” he said.

“No problem. We were told you have information about my daughter's friend?” asked Ramona.

“Yes, we had already informed Eliza's family. Because of something our guys in forensics found, we thought it would be best for Shandra to come in.”

“What happened to her?” asked Shandra.

“She was murdered,” answered Cortez, “Whoever took her cut her apart.”

Shandra's head jerked downward in surprise of what happened. Her sunset red hair dropped around her head to cover the face full of tears. “That's horrible! Why would someone do that to her?” asked Ramona.

“If only I could say. But that is not the disturbing part.”

The sound of a hand shuffling through papers in the folder taunted Shandra. A picture capturing the fate of someone she truly cared about sent shivers throughout her body. She tried to get her head to sit straight up but her mind grew too heavy. From the corner of her eye, she noticed Cortez hand over a picture of her mother. The corners of the page hanged just low enough for the dark pools of red to become exposed. Shandra knew her friend was slaughtered like an animal. Her mother froze in shock at the sight of what was once a human being.

“Whoever did this is going to do it again. We don't know how they will pick future victims since this the first time something like this has emerged,”

said Officer Cortez.

A couple peeps come from Shandra's mother. “So... you mean that this was a serial killer?” she asked.

“Not officially but we are looking at the possibility.”

“Can I see the picture?” asked Shandra.

Shandra mustered enough strength to lift her head. Her eyes were clouded with tears, and her voice was still trying to choke, but regardless of how she felt at the moment, she needed to see what had become of her friend.

“Are you sure about that honey?” asked Ramona.

Shandra nodded. Cortez signaled that it was alright, but from the look on his face, he was uneasy about how Shandra would react.

The smooth texture of the photo paper calmly rested itself in Shandra's hand. She uses her other hand to clear her eyes of tears that would distort and cloud the truth. But the second she rested the picture in her hand, she quickly wished she was completely blind. Not only had her friend been sliced apart, but whoever killed her got creative with the blood-soaked carcass. The body was cut apart at every joint and something was burned into the skin. Across both arms and the chest, the killer left the message, “There will be more.”

My vision of the incident froze in my mind's eye for some unknown reason. It gave me enough time to allow the mindset gifted by my buddies in the local forensics unit to set in. Patterns from my lessons started to piece themselves together, giving me insight into what had happened moments before the demise of the first known victim.

First off, the amount of blood that covered the floors and body indicated there were more victims. It was hard to tell from the picture but it had seemed every inch of the room was covered in blood, too much for even the largest of people. There were the lonesome drops about the size of quarters. The rather messy trajectory patterns showed the body was taken apart by a circular saw. One look at the ends of each body part back-ups that theory, also adding the blade was somewhat dull seeing how the flesh was torn apart. The last thing I noticed was bruising just around the victim's wrists and ankles. She held in place and constantly tried to free herself as if tortured. By the looks of the burned message, she was still alive when it was left in her skin.

When more tears came into Shandra's eyes, my vision faded away. My mind had returned just a few moments after Shandra fell into my arms. Something about my stillness told her what I was doing. “You saw her, didn't you?” she moaned.

“Yeah. Now I get it,” I answered.

“Just be careful okay. I don't want to lose you.”

I pulled away from Shandra so I could look her in the eye. “I don't plan on dying today,” I assured her. As she nodded her head in acknowledgment of the truth. I closed my eyes and kissed Shandra's forehead. I wasn't even sure if it

would be my last, but I wanted it to remember it case it was. Now that I knew people had been killed by the very hands of the people that took Jessica, I needed to ready myself for the worst. This was my purpose in life after the Devil himself brought me back to life after the first time I died in this life, the purpose of my Shadow Hunter.

I stood up and mouthed the word, “goodbye” to the two members that affected my love life. Shandra was to head home with Brianna to bring about the safe return of her sister while I drove off to meet with Jerome down at the police station. Not a single breath was taken between the slam of my car door and the screams of my tires speeding away. I glanced in the rear view mirror just before the park leaves my sight to check on the girls. They had started to walk home together arm-in-arm. I was somewhat glad Shandra was there to cover the bases that I wasn't able. It was rather beautiful, to be honest.

Maybe it would come useful in future attempts involving police cases, but it wasn't time for Shandra to try her hand. Cops can be a nuisance when it comes to the occult, mostly due to media frenzy, but after some convincing, they'll listen like dogs. As I drove, about five miles to the police station, I thought of ways to plow through the crowds. I sped past at least five police cruisers who thought I was already trying to plow through the city because of how fast I was going.

I watched from my rear view as the sirens flashed red, white, and blue on the unfortunate bystanders on the sidewalks. The police station sat on the left side of a four-lane road. Two lanes of traffic going the opposite direction blocked the entrance. Noting that it was my only chance to avoid getting rammed into by the cops behind me, I took a chance and jumped the curb once a tight opening was exposed. The cruisers drove too fast to be able to catch up when the next opening was exposed, thus driving at least five blocks away before finding an opportunity to turn around.

In my closing window of opportunity, I parked my car near an exit meant for garbage guys. Jumping out of the vehicle and beeping the doors shut, I hurried into the station to find Jerry. On the sidewalk, just outside the station grounds, I could see people on their cellphones ranting, “He just walked into the police station,” and, “No, he doesn't have a weapon on him.” They were right, I didn't have a weapon on me. It was the weapons inside me they should worry about.

Three officers were just walking outside through heavy glass doors with their hands on the holsters and palms held out as if to hold me back. “Stop and put your hands above your head,” shouted one of the officers. It was a nice try. The clouds above us grew and blackened the sky. With the veil, I took a chance and used my abilities to fly right over the three officers. Technically it isn't considered evasion of officers since I walked right into the police station on my own accord. The light murmurs that swirled behind me showed the job just confused the cops. If they tried anything I had a few ideas to keep them busy.

I yanked open the doors leading into the station, nearly tearing them off

of the hinges. Considering the glass was supposed to be bullet-proof one would think that whoever built the damn place would put in hinges that supported large weight amounts. Several desks nearly carpeted the floors, with two cops stationed at each. One stepped out in front of me. “What the hell are you doing here?” he asked.

“I need to see Officer Jerome immediately, so I ask you ever so kindly to let him know that one of his CI’s has arrived. And you should probably strap your holster before somebody who comes in for questioning gets a little jumpy,” I answered.

“It's alright Detective, I have a feeling this is important. Otherwise, he wouldn't be here,” said Jerry. The Detective returned to his desk but fixed his eyes on me. He was ready to kill me on the spot. “Please tell me you got something otherwise he will try to put a bullet in you,” Jerry added.

“I may and what I may have may help with a call you responded to a couple days ago.”

“You mean the girl that got taken earlier? What do know about her?”

An empty chair sat across from Jerry's desk that I borrowed to get a more comfortable position on the matter by sliding it just underneath me and taking a seat. “I happened to know this latest victim happened to be a very dear friend of mine and, her life may be coming to a bloody end,” I answered.

“Jesus man, what the hell is it with you and the damsel in distress? First Shandra now Jessica?”

“Actually I was dating Jessica's sister, Brianna before I met Shandra. And because Shandra was a witness to another kidnapping, possibly tied to Jessica, she has been trying to console Brianna all day. Which leads me here! As for why women in trouble tend to come my way, I have been trying to figure that out for years now.”

“Any luck?”

“Well... I have it reduced down to the day we met.”

“You mean when...”

“Yes, something that you didn't find out was that the Devil himself saved my life.”

Officer Jerome shuddered as the memories of the moment we became acquainted. “Shut up about it. Otherwise, you might lose your CI checks. Now I know you want something, now what is it?”

“A name, I know that. Whatever name was registered to the last vehicle spotted. I might be able to send my probes out to find something if I know who to look for.”

“Why can't you just send them after the girl?”

“She is scared shitless which blocks me. I need to find someone who is either the reason or has been seeing it happen and is just not speaking.”

"Got it. As far as we know there is only one name. A Richard Simon was spotted at multiple abduction sights but no evidence was found to link him to the crimes."

"So either he is an unfortunate bastard with horrible timing or a sneaky son of a bitch with a little too much to sneak."

"Your second idea may be more correct. He was also spotted near other alleged sightings of the kidnapping victim moments before."

"Got a picture of him on file?"

"Yeah, just give me a few minutes."

Jerry adjusted the front of his chair towards a keyboard connected to an old desktop computer. The operating system was outdated by a few years, making the process drag on. I remember tapping against the arms of the chair knowing that any minute the cops I outran would storm in with guns drawn. Sure enough, six officers come in guns drawn. "Alright asshole, get your hands up now!" they screamed.

"Okay, if you say so," I said. I jerked my arms in the position they wished. Clicks and cocks of every weapon made everyone jumps as every weapon in the room flew upward and aimed themselves. The stubborn speedsters froze in their tracks after seeing their own guns yanked and shoved into their throats, ready to fire, by an unseen force. I couldn't be attached to a crime of threatening an officer if my hands weren't on the weapons. They couldn't do anything to stop me because, with every slight movement they made, a gun would mime the motion.

"Easy Dakota, they are just doing their job," whispered Jerry.

"As am I," I growled, "Did the damn system find anything yet?"

"Yes, Mr. Simon's address and his place of work. Now get out of here before shit gets out of hand!"

"Send everything to my phone and I will go check it out."

"Go!"

I rose from my seat and gently maneuvered through the frozen cops and floating guns. The wandering eyes of the frightened followed my movements until I was out the door.

"By the way, Cortez just left not too long ago to check up on a lead. Be careful if you two cross paths," shouted Jerry just before I left the station.

With a wave of my hand, I signaled to Jerry that I heard his warning and for the weapons to take out their ammunition and drop to the floor. I could hear everyone scrambling to collect their weapons and shouting lines centered around the question, "What the fuck just happened?"

They were too disoriented by the confusion to notice anything else. A storm was allowing itself to prepare for what it held inside the clouds and they would not have a clue of its existence as long as they stayed indoors. This would

play to my advantage as I read through the information Jerome sent me on my phone.

"Richard Simon, age thirty-five, about six foot tall, two-hundred-seventy pounds, married, two kids, lives in an apartment on the south side of town, works as one of the foremen for an old warehouse, and tends to work very long hours," is what the text said followed by an image from Simon's driver's license.

When I saw his face another vision appeared in my head. It was partially blurry because the emotions of the target caused interference, yet the images stayed clear enough to see the truth. The man I was hunting was attacking another girl at that very moment. A young blonde was being stripped nude at knifepoint, struggling to get free. In the fight, the blade would slip into her skin spilling drips of blood all over. Simon took her by the hair and lead her to a wooden wall, just to strike her head hard enough to silence her cries. While wiping the sweat off his brow, he pounded against the wall to reveal a small crawlspace. Taking the unconscious girl by the arm, Simon crammed her body into space where it started to slide out of view.

Faint cries shrieked for help as the door to the crawlspace closed. Simon simply observed his clothes for any signs of what took place, and when none could be found, he simply adjusted his figure and returned to work.

My vision faded giving me no other details about the building or who all was trapped inside that old warehouse. But I knew that Simon was the one and he needed to be confronted about his actions. If the police got to him, he had a chance of getting away with the crimes. I couldn't let that happen. He needed to be taken care of by a force not bound to the laws. Many may interpret my actions as an act of fruitless vengeance and that it would not erase what happened. In truth maybe it was some form of vengeance that drove me, but it was not to erase the past, it was to keep it from happening again.

It was the only thought that ran through my mind as I got into my car and readied myself for the attack. I took a couple breaths to slow my heart rate. If I came in with a machine gun for a heartbeat, it would only burn me in the end. The best method was to approach this as a concerned friend of the victim. "Calm down dude," I said to myself, "Jessica needs you."

"Something you don't see," whispered a grandmother-like voice.

Thin, weak, and bony fingers graced the back of my head. Whoever possessed that voice was personally implanted something into my mind. It was another vision inside the same warehouse of terrors. I had another glimpse of Simon sitting at a desk. He jumped at the sound of the door being jerked open. Officer Cortez emerged from the doorway and hurried over to Simon's side.

"My superiors are getting suspicious. They are sending in a raid team later. We need to move the bitches now!" he shrieked.

"Gabriel, you moron! You were supposed to keep them off of us!"

"Internal Affairs has been on my ass! They fucking started getting

suspicious, so I came to warn you. They think I am off chasing a lead and if I don't report back soon they will know something is up."

"Would you relax? They haven't found anything that links us, have they?"

"No, but..."

"Relax. As long as they don't find the entrance to the cellar, we are fine."

"Fine. I'll head back to the station to get them off of our trails. But you seriously need to do something to get them quiet. Regardless of what I do they will send in a squad to search the area."

"I know. I already have something prepared to make sure no one makes a peep."

Simon reached to a drawer on his desk and opens it, revealing several cans of what appeared to be air freshener. Before I could see anymore details the vision faded. The person who induced it felt I seen enough to understand the situation. There was a police cover-up, I couldn't tell for how long, but Cortez was a significant player. It didn't matter that a cop was in on it, not at all. Cops like to stick together, which is an honorable trait, but mixed with ignorance and corruption it would lead to genocide. There are good cops, there are good soldiers but with numbers comes corruption. The very forces designed to protect the public become the very enemy. This is where people like me come in. We come in when nothing is done to clean a mess and scare the shit out of everyone.

Modern culture has become so centered around figures of the media. When the world reaches the next war all it will take to distract the masses would be to simply dangle a random celebrity scandal in front of them so the foolish will go on like nothing is happening and those aware are too ridiculed to speak out. Becoming the very celebrity was the only way to turn the tables and smash the problem through them.

'Perhaps I should get a few more eyes on the streets,' I thought to myself. With my cell phone, I dialed the number to a nearby news station to let them in on this secret.

"Hello, this is Maggie with KSAR news channel thirteen," answered a woman.

"I have some information that gets your moron station a decent story," I said making my voice sound deeper.

"Sir, if you have information you can send it in on our website."

"No time. I have information on the strings of kidnapped girls turning up dead."

On the other end of the line, I could hear the sound of Maggie desperately trying to find a pen and a pad of paper. Apparently, they have been looking for information so they would be able to lead the story but came up short. "Please go on," she requested.

“A person of interest has been stopped at the old warehouse on the corner of Smith and Elizabeth, many of the girls who have gone missing have been reported to be spotted in this area. Many who were tied up with bags over their heads. Rumor is that the person of interest is the one taking these girls. In a few minutes, a man is going to go in and tear apart the entire building if he manages to find any trace of the missing girls. Also if something does get found it will be likely police activity in the area will increase and there will be a heavy loss of life. Give it about half an hour before bullets fly.”

Before she could respond I hung up the phone. It would cause them to scramble to find out more information. Even if they ignored the tip they will be soon to crawl all over the crime scene. This needed to get as sloppy as I could get it. I started the car and let the engine roar like the Hounds of Hell. The old warehouse was two miles away from the police station. It is ironic about how missing person's cases became resolved within a few miles from where they disappeared.

The buildings were not very tall in this part of town making it easier to see the warehouse. An old steel building came into view, one that looks so weak and run down a child's toy hammer could take it apart. I needed to be careful otherwise I could cause the building to collapse over the only exits for the girls still alive to get out. I took note of everything as I drove through the streets. People on the streets completely oblivious to what was about to happen. But the dogs and birds acted like they suspected something. They wailed and howled and screeched as if Death himself had come.

I found an entrance to the warehouse that was away from the public eye near a couple dumpsters. Countless cats were digging through the trash as if they were starved and smelt something pleasing. For all, I knew those cats were been dining on the rotten, soupy flesh of previous victims. I didn't want to look, so I based my assumptions solely on the smell alone. Keeping the focus on finding Robert Simon was the only thing that kept me conscious. Pulling up near the entrance, I paused for a moment.

“I can't believe I am about to do this,” I said to myself. All my life I had imagined situations where I would come out the hero. All my life I would dream about slicing apart some bad guy just enough to make them fit inside a small Tupperware bowl. I was finally going to do fulfill that dream. The idea of taking a life held me back, but something about the idea of saving a life would ease the guilt.

Knowing that this was a high-risk operation, I did everything in my power to keep quiet. As I crawled out of my car, I made sure to gently shut and lock it. I didn't know who all was inside. Cortez being here was enough trouble. I needed to allow my Shadow Hunter to take over my body. He knew how to stalk these types of people. But he was paired with my Light Hunter in order to find information on the situation. As his image appeared in my head, two spots appeared on the ground. One giving off bright white light. One giving off dark energies. Both began to shrink as my counterparts rose from them.

"What took you guys so long?" I asked them.

"We were counting the bodies down in the sick bastard's personal dungeons," answered my shadow ego, "At least twenty dead and one alive."

"And yes Jessica is amongst the living, but seeing her condition she may die in the next twenty-four hours if we don't move in," added my Light Hunter.

"Alright, I have an idea. I need you, Shadow, to help me sneak in without anyone noticing. I could do it by myself but with you, I have a thicker cloak to work with. Light, once we are in I am going to need your help to help keep me from killing him. I want to present myself as nothing more than a concerned friend for the first few moments. But when the time comes and I find Jessica, I also need you guys to help heal her wounds if they are too severe. As for me, I will get what I need out of him then make sure he doesn't do it ever again."

Both of my counterparts shook their heads to signal an agreement before allowing themselves to mold into my body. I felt the shift in power as my Shadow Hunter leaped into the controls and lead the way. I remember sneaking through the back door and constantly scanning for any potential threats. I came to a large metal door with a thick glass window. Through it, I could see perhaps five men monitoring conveyor belts carrying various merchandise to ship out to stores across the country. The noise alone from a typical workday made it an ideal hiding place for a torture chamber.

The door was guarded by a keypad. I didn't have a way of busting it open without getting myself too much attention. In the moment I could think of only think one option to get in. If I could cause the keypad to sound off an alarm, at least one would go check it out thinking maybe it is an animal or a child playing with it. They would not have any suspicion of it because no one has ever tried to get in and their boss would try to make sure no one saw the girls. I knew that the key codes often contained four digits. So I pressed different combinations each adding up to the number twenty-one, the ultimate combination for blackjack. All that is meant to be in life is a true gamble after all. Society tries to play by the odds that grow the best in their favor but are also tricked into thinking those odds do not shift. This was a case that stirred in favor of the odds less traveled.

First, try, a buzzer sounded off. Second and third tries sounded off the same. The fourth finally sounds an alarm in their security system. I could hear light footsteps coming from inside coming to inspect my actions. The door came open and a male figure peered his head to observe the scenery. I was lying just underneath the side of the steps leading to that door. When the door opened, the alarm continued to sound. It had to be shut off by the correct combination.

I lifted myself up to where I was able to see the combination lock so I could note the combination. My heart began to race knowing I was so close to my purpose. Perhaps it was the adrenaline coursing through my veins that helped me remember the combination. Two. Seven. Four. Eight. Somehow I was

right that the numbers added up to twenty-one. Funny how instinct can lead to the right choices. But given that there was a countless inventory of possible combinations, it was difficult for even those who built the machines to get an accurate guess without tearing the unit apart.

Once the man tucked himself back inside the building after resetting the alarm, I got up and positioned myself to where lights would have a hard time spotting me. I typed in the combination I spotted and earned a sense of relief when the gears inside the system became loose. I went inside and slowly closed the door behind me so no one would notice. Even if the boss was a total asshole people tend to get a little on edge if you knock around the person that sign's their weekly paychecks.

Money has become the second form of blood in so-called advanced countries. But if a creature were to adapt to this shade of blood, it quickly becomes poisoned. Perhaps that is why people with not so much in their life always seemed to be the happiest.

My Shadow Hunter helped adjust my eyes to low-light conditions. During the night-shift lights were placed to simply help keep an eye on the machines. Everything else depended on the eyes making the adjustment. It made for dangerous conditions but it was all they had. I was pretty sure several workplace violations existed in this very building, turning things to my advantage.

A shimmer of light revealed the bottom of a metal staircase leading to a catwalk. The difference in shadows indicated some sort of room was upstairs. It was the office. I made a beeline for the stairs, making gentle steps so no one would hear me. My weight alone upset the weak stairs, but somehow I made it sound like the moans of an old building. Suddenly I found the door leading to that room. I graced my hand against the door to find some sort of nameplate. I felt some smooth edges towards top of the door that felt a bit denser than the rest. I allowed my hands to relax a bit so I could get an idea of what I was sensing. From what I could tell it was a metal slate about two inches high stood just at my eye level. My index finger brushed against the surface so I could read the engraving. “Richard Simon, Head of Production,” read the nameplate.

I was about to bust right through the door before I was stopped by my Light Hunter. “Remember, you need to act calm. He can't know that we are onto him,” he reminded me.

I shook my head acknowledging the truth. Simon could not know that I was aware of his activities. So with slices of disappointments, I knocked on the door.

“Please come in,” he shouted.

I opened the door and walked into his office. “Mr. Simon I was wondering if I could speak with you about the missing girls the police have questioned about,” I said.

“Please shut the door and have a seat,” he said, acting as if nothing was

going on.

As he wished I shut the door and took a seat at his desk that stood about four feet away from the door. His office seemed to live to expectations of a facility like this. Family photos standing in wooden frames gave company to cluttered papers and a desktop computer. Not much decorated his walls except for a few more photos showing his wife and kids and a calendar. Old sets of blinds covered windows that looked over the work area on the lower floor. Kind of a boring place if you ask me.

"So before we get into this, what is your name son? And if I may, why the hell do you want to know about those girls?" he asked me.

"My name is Dakota Frandsen and one of the latest girls taken happened to be a dear friend of mine."

"Oh really? I guess she is lucky to have someone who worries about her."

"Yeah, yeah. Now listen, I was informed that you had been spotted at multiple abduction sites, so I know you must have noticed something."

"Are you sure that I was the one that saw those girls?"

From under the desk, I could hear the click of the hammer on a revolver. Somehow this guy was onto me. "Not yet," whispered my Light Hunter in my mind.

"I was informed that you have been questioned and you have provided the police with a few details. I just want to know if you can provide me with any information that you couldn't tell the police for whatever reason."

Another pistol click came from just underneath the desk. Simon was clearly not going to be willing to even try to divert me away. He was getting ready to put a bullet in my head. "You know, you shouldn't get involved with these matters and let the police clean up the mess," he grinned.

"Get him!" growled my Shadow Hunter.

I placed my foot on the edge of the desk and kicked. The commotion caused Simon to accidentally fire the weapon into the ground before dropping it. An opening under the desk made the weapon easy for me to grab as I flipped over the desk. Simon screamed in agony, hoping that one of his employees would come to his rescue. I couldn't let that happen so I dragged a filing cabinet over to block the door. The echo of footsteps stampeding a metal staircase filled the air just outside the office. But it didn't matter. I had a least two minutes before somebody worked through the adrenaline in order to find a way to bust in here. With the revolver still in my hand, I opened it to check how much ammo was inside. Five bullets remained with the number thirty-five etched into the backs of the casings. This was going to hurt, a lot.

I closed the revolver then checked out the damage done to Simon as he was banging his head against his desk that sat upon the backs of his hands. I was unsure why he didn't use his hands to move the desk until I noticed his fingers

turned a dark purple. The poor bastard now had broken hands. Seeing how he liked to throw around his victims I felt it was an appropriate punishment to return the favor. But there was more to come. I hurried back over and pulled down his desk to its intended position. Richard was now sobbing as he stared at his throbbing hands now deformed from the busted bones.

"You son of a bitch, I'm going to fucking kill you!" he cried.

"Shut the hell up," I told him. His body swayed back and forth as if to summon a healer, screaming in pain. I pulled back the hammer on the revolver and aimed towards his shoulder. Bang. The bullet tore through both skin and bone as it flew. Bang. Chunks of his skin on his other shoulder flew off as if torn by a hungry animal. Bang. His left kneecap became plastered in blood against the floor. Bang. A bloody trickle emerged from his right hip. I saved the last bullet by tucking the revolver inside my jean pocket.

"Oh Lord, please save me!" he cried.

I ran behind his desk and punched him in the face. "I said shut up!" I yelled, "I know you took those girls. I know how you beat the shit out of them when they wouldn't give in. I know how you like to take off their clothes once they are unconscious. I know that once you are done you slice them up into little pieces!"

"How?"

"Because the Devil sent me!"

Suddenly the look in his eyes changed from tortured soul to fear of his fate. Apparently, he was a religious man who felt the eyes of God protected him so he could do whatever he wished without consequence. I didn't care much for religion. I didn't care what religion people followed. But the moment they abuse the right to religion as an excuse to commit a crime was the point I drew the line. It was why countless troops are overseas and becoming damaged to the point when they get home they become just like the guys they fought.

"I did this in God's name, you cannot kill me!" screamed Simon.

"We shall see," I laughed.

I noticed an indent in the wall close to the floor that resembled what I had seen in my vision from earlier. Time was running out as indicated by the bangs and bounces against the window and door leading into the office. Simon's employees heard everything and felt compelled to save their boss. I needed to get out of there but the only exit was blocked. I needed to escape through the hidden door. I grabbed Richard by the hair and dragged his weak body out of the office chair. The blood from his wounds formed a trail on the carpet floor as I took him over to the entrance of the chute he used to hide the bodies of his victims.

"I believe this is where you take them," I grunted.

"Please don't do this," he cried, "I don't want to see them."

"It is too late to beg. The demons you created are waiting."

I kicked just above the indent in the wall to open the passage and threw him inside. His body banged itself against the sides while painting a path with the blood from his wounds. The metal surface wobbled and shook with every bounce until a loud snap silenced it all. Richard's body was now weak to the point any wrong movement would snap his bones in four. Exactly how I wanted him.

I sat on the floor and readied myself for the trip down. I grabbed the sides of the chute so I could launch myself into it, only to be rushed by shouting workers and shattering glass. I did not want them to see what I had done to their boss, for they would have attempted to kill me before I had the chance to save Jessica. So I took the revolver out of my pocket and slid down the chute with the weapon in hand. The chute grew darker and darker as the entrance to it closed above me. It was a straight ride down that became halted by a loud crunch. It was Richard's spine breaking under my feet. He screamed in agony as I twisted my feet around on his back. I stepped to the side, allowing him relief from adding onto his misery.

“Jessica, are you in here?” I asked, “Jessica?!”

Hoping for a response I scanned the darkness, only lit by dim fluorescent bulbs in the ceiling. noting something was moving in a single spot in the far corner. It was a person curled over another body. A light came on as I tried to move closer revealing the horrifying truth. The blood of dozens coated the walls and floors accompanied by several fresh bodies. Some had yet to be dismembered. My head started to rush. I started to lose my footing but as I caught myself I found one girl who was still alive.

“Jessica, is that you?” I asked.

She was hunched over the blonde I saw in my last vision, positioning her body as if she was laid in a casket with the remainder of her clothing stretched over her. At the sound of my voice, Jessica jumped, thinking I was her attacker coming to finish the job.

“Hey, it's me. Dakota. I have come to get you out of here,” I told her.

“Dakota?” she whined.

I watched as she turned to face me, covered from head to toe in what was left of those also taken. Her clothes barely held together. I couldn't tell if she was wounded in any way but the way she moved showed damage much deeper. It was going to be hard to heal her if it was possible at all. What had happened to her took something away she may never get back. Even if she were able to move on, she would never be the same.

“It's over. I am taking you home now,” I assured her.

Her jaw dropped. She couldn't believe that I was the one to come for her in her time of need, which became more apparent with each gentle step she could. In the space between us, there were at least six bodies she stepped over and around to get to my side. Her blood-soaked hands reached out to me. Her fingers pressed against my chest to see if I was real, to see if I was actually there

with her. To let her know that this was all real I tucked away the pistol and grabbed her hands and drew two hearts with my thumbs against the backs, one for each hand.

“Why did you come for me?” she asked.

“Do you remember the promise I made to your sister we broke up? That no matter what happens between us I would always be there for her?”

“Yeah?”

“I meant it for you as well.”

Not a second passed before I found myself with Jessica wrapped around me. Her heart raced in joy, she was going to get out of Hell's waiting room. Our serene reunion was cut short by heavy breathing and the growls of hungry animals.

“They have come for me,” Simon shouted, “They will take you too.”

“No, they are only here for you,” I growled.

“Please make him go away,” Jessica whispered.

I aimed Simon's revolver and pulled back the hammer in order to prepare the next bullet. Killing him was the ultimate goal. The goal to make sure he could not harm anyone ever again. Not for vengeance, but as punishment for his actions and to place fear into others that plan on similar endeavors. The corrupt tend to get nasty when they aren't frightened by those who watch them. Very few had the courage to fight back because our country focuses on who fired the last shot instead of making all who battled take on the responsibility. Perhaps it was because of my own battles that I felt responsible for helping people in these situations.

Something about the gunshot seemed to startle the ceiling while settling the beasts around us. Jessica and I looked toward the ceiling as the metal structure shouted stampedes have come. My Shadow Hunter greeted us to bring the status of the topside operation.

“The cops are here and they are packing,” he whispered. Jessica acted as if she couldn't hear him.

“Jessica, the police are here,” I told her.

“But how will they find us?” she asked.

“We are going to need to scream up the chute. Do you know where the second entrance is?”

“Yeah, but it's hard to find. Somehow it is hidden in the walls. I never got a chance to see it.”

“It's alright, we will think of something.”

We stopped to listen into the commotion above us. It sounded like a fight broke out amongst the workers and police. Jessica and I walked over to the bottom of the chute screaming to the tops of our lungs. With frustration at the

lack of results, I threw the empty weapon into the chute, hoping I would throw just hard enough to open it.

"Let me try," whispered my Light Hunter.

A large ball of white light emerged from my body and fired itself up the chute. The energy somehow made the lights in the ceiling grow brighter. Jessica's voice grew quiet at the sight of what was happening. She has never seen me like this, in the heat of battle. I looked over to see her face frozen.

"Relax, it will get us out of here," I assured her. Before she could speak the seal opened at the top of the chute, igniting more motivation to shout for help.

A cop turned on his flashlight and peeked inside the chute. A helmet and mask covered most of his face, indicating he was a member of the local SWAT team. When he finally saw us, he removed his mask that covered his mouth so we could understand.

"Are you guys okay down there?" he asked.

"We're fine. But there are dozens of bodies down here. Most of them look like some of the girls that have been reported missing!" I answered.

"What are your names?"

Jessica gains enough strength to speak. "My name is Jessica Summers and this is my friend Dakota Frandsen," she says while moving her hands to gesture our identities.

"How are you guys the only ones alive?"

"We will explain later. There is another way out of here but we can't find the door. Any of you have a lighter or two and some paper we could use?" I shouted.

"Hold on a second."

Upstairs all of the cops scattered to find the materials I had asked for. If there was a hidden door here, having smoke around could help find an exit. I looked around to find any lack of consistencies in the wall that would give me an idea where to look.

"Coming down," shouted another officer. Shreds of paper glided down the chute as if directed by the quickly falling lighters that tapped against the floor. We both picked a lighter and grabbed a few sheets of paper.

"Thank you!" shouted Jessica.

"Be careful you two. We will try to get the blueprints to this place while you smoke for the exit."

Needing no further words Jessica and I lit the corner of individual pieces of paper and gently walked along the walls. The smoke would help make it easier to spot where the air seemingly passed straight through the walls. Small splashes filled the space underneath our feet with each step we took. It was hard to avoid all of the bodies.

But we hoped the spirits of those who fell here would forgive us, knowing that justice would come to them even in death. The fires would quickly try to reach our fingers. If that were to happen we simply blew them out and lit another sheet. The smoke danced and twirled off of the flames as if to grace the sky. Something in my chest gave me the feeling that I was getting closer to the answer. My suspicions were confirmed when the smoke spun through a very thin crack in the wall. I knocked on the wall so I could test the theory. Toward the left of the crack, hardly any outside noise could be heard. Toward the right, an echo was heard. I found the exit.

"Jessica I found it!" I shouted. She blew out her burning sheet and hurried to my side to confirm the news. We were so much closer to freedom. "Go let them know," I said.

"No problem," she replied. She walked back over to the bottom of the chute and began shouting, "We found it!" The voice of the officer seemed to stutter from my position but by Jessica's body language she could hear them loud and clear. I watched as she pointed in my direction. More chatter is heard from other officers that responded to the scene, still difficult to understand.

"Step back they are on their way," she told me.

I followed her suggestion and took three steps back. We could hear the officers storming out of the room upstairs and throughout the building. For a minute we could not hear anything from the outside world. Our worries started to grow. What if something happened to them?

We eased our worries once we saw the officers break through the hidden doorway. Before they spoke to us, they observed the bodies that lay all around us. Some even appeared to have almost vomited in their own suits.

"What the hell happened here?" one asked.

"Hell is what happened," answered Jessica.

"I can tell," he said. The leader of the group turns back to his colleagues and said, "Let's get these two out of here."

They lead us out of the room and onto the street. Apparently, the room where all of the girls were hidden was underground and could only be reached by a cellar door. It had seemed every working person in civil services was waiting outside freshly laid police tape. When we emerged the eyes of everyone nearly escaped their heads at the sight of us. All they could see was two people drenched in blood with hardly a mark on them. A news van drove into view just across the street. Two people jumped out, one with a large camera hoisted upon his shoulders and hurried towards us. For some reason, in a city that was only twelve square miles large, the local newsgroup believed they worked in a major city. If given the chance, they would not have a problem showing the decaying bodies of children on the six o'clock news. They have tried to do it in the past with fallen officers, which nearly earned themselves a body riddled with bullets. One of the SWAT guys noticed how the reporter mostly focused on the entrance to the torture room and readied his assault rifle. Perhaps he knew one of the

missing girls.

Jerry stood right next to one of the ambulances parked just outside the tape. Jessica was taken inside to be examined by the paramedics when he stopped me in my tracks by placing his hand on my shoulder. “Let me guess, Richard Simon is dead,” he joked.

“Yep,” I answered.

“You torture him?”

“Yep.”

“He made the first move?”

“Yep.”

He took a deep breath as if he knew the answer to the next question. “So how bad is it in there?” he asked.

“Blood is everywhere. It is hard to count how many bodies are in there for how bad some of them are cut up.”

His eyes adjusted to the direction I came from. Something about what he saw disturbed him. I turned to see what was catching his attention. The forensics unit had arrived and started in on the investigation. “Alright, you need to get out of here. I will take care them,” he whispered.

“Dude, my car is on the other side of the building,” I told him.

“Just be careful. A case this nasty is likely to attract the Feds.”

I hated having to leave, but Jerry was right. The high intensity of this case would easily attract federal investigators and our shadow net for catching bad guys would be exposed. I shut my eyes and nodded in agreement.

“But before you go, did you happen to see Cortez?” he asked.

It dawned on me. Where in the hell was Cortez? I saw him in my vision but when I made it inside the building I didn't see him anywhere. “He fled before I got here,” I told him.

“You mean he...”

“Yeah, he helped cover this up.”

I walked over to Jessica's side to check on her. One of the paramedics was shining a flashlight into her eyes to check for a concussion. Her pupils responded normally, and given the circumstances, it was definitely a miracle. She was always a bit hard-headed, yet when it sometimes became annoying, it was what saved her.

“How are you doing?” I asked her.

“Good, thanks to you,” she giggled.

“You're welcome. I need to get out of here but I will check on you later 'kay?”

“Dakota wait!”

As I was just about to leave I was halted by Jessica's grasp. She had leaped from the back of the ambulance, wrapped her arms around me and rested her head against my shoulder. Her legs dangled almost two feet off the ground as I wrapped my arms around her. I remember a bright flash of light engulfing us. Somebody took our picture, perhaps as a symbol of hope. I felt her chin moving against the gap in my collar bone. “You know, there will come a day when you will make some girl very happy,” she whispered.

To the best of my knowledge, she didn't know about Shandra at the time. But I couldn't help but make a subtle reference. “I think I already found her,” I whispered back.

“Good. I hope it turns out for the best.”

“And I hope that you find happiness as well.”

She let out a slight moan before dropping from around my neck. Without any further words, we parted ways. She stayed close to Jerry while I tried sneaking over to my car. I could feel her eyes watching me as I walked away that stayed until I turned to a corner not covered by the public eye. A lone alleyway with nothing more than my car and a dumpster appeared before me. I pulled out my keys from my pocket. But a sharp needle spitting a drug into my system and a bag over my head nearly rendered me unconscious.

War of the Universe

PROOF

Chapter 9
The Suits

My sense of time and space grew weak. I couldn't tell how long it was until the drugs wore off and I found myself in a room. I tried standing but my wrists and ankles were bound to a cold, metal chair. My vision started out blurry but slowly cleared to find a man in a black suit. No, not the alien-looking ones that tried to kill me. The man in front of me was definitely human. I could hear him trying to speak to me, but all I could hear were distant murmurs.

“Hello Mr. Frandsen, you and I have much to discuss,” he said when my hearing finally cleared.

“Where am I?” I asked.

“We are at a secret facility underground. My bosses believe that this would be the safest way to have a conversation with you considering everything you are capable of doing.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, normally I would tell you all about what we do, but based on what our sources have collected on you, you already have a pretty good idea.”

I didn't have a clue what he was talking about. The drugs must have still been working their way through my system. I felt weak, like parts of me were missing.

“I see that the drugs are still lingering in your system. Don't worry, you should be back together with your counterparts very soon. The drug was designed to put roadblocks in your brain that prevent paranormal powers from emerging. Apparently, they take up most of your mental functions which are

why you are acting like you were interrupted from a deep sleep," he said.

I sat up and shook my head. He was right, my Shadow and Light Hunters were no longer attached to my soul. I was weak, tired, and somewhat helpless. I still had access to some of my powers but they were activated by thought and I was simply too weak.

"How much did you give me?" I asked.

"I believe the recommended dosage to bring you in was pretty close to what is needed to knock out a small grizzly bear," he joked.

I gave him a look that said I wasn't in the mood for jokes.

"Sorry, but it is true," he said. I watched as he pulled out a chair from a nearby desk and sat about three feet away from me.

"So before we continue, can I at least ask what your name is?" I asked.

"My name is Ronald Ford. The organization I work for doesn't really have a name, but I do believe that you had called us 'The Suits?' I have heard many names tossed around by conspiracy theorists but I honestly like that one better."

I didn't care for the friendly conversation that Ronald was trying to make because his guys tried to kill me. But I had a chance to dig into something deeper kept me from going ballistic. "So what is it that you want from me?" I asked.

"There is a war coming. A war unlike any other. An invasion that will lead to a war of worlds."

My attention was in full. Extraterrestrials have long been rumored to visit our world, and even intervene in our wars. But a war of the worlds would be something new, something that could destroy civilizations. Many of the other races out there are considered to be friendly, so who was going to invade?

"What is going on?" I asked.

"In short, deals that were made back with a couple of the invaders in the forties and fifties have broken. Our agents have been closely monitoring bursts in electromagnetic frequencies that are only possible with high-speed space travel; essentially our radios can 'hear' when the ships slow down. So many of their scouts have made their way into the solar system as we speak, some even setting up shop on the moon."

"Whose scouts?"

"We don't know. There are at least thirty civilizations we have made contact with the outside of our planet, with the strong belief that much more are still out there. We don't know who is fighting or even what they want. All we know is that they have been watching for a very long time."

I heard two knocks on a metal surface come from behind me. Ronald looked to where it originated and signaled with his index finger for the source to enter. I heard a metal door handle click and a door open. A woman had entered

the room.

“Mr. Ford, I have the file you requested,” she said.

“Excellent! Bring it here and meet our guest,” he suggested. The sound of high heels walked towards him, just passing me. I managed to get a good look at her. She stood at about five and a half feet with a mosquito-like build. Her skin and hair nearly held the same shade of gray. This woman did not look healthy at all. She handed a thick file over to Ronald then turned to face me. Without missing a beat her faced dropped as if she was starstruck.

“Ms. Grey, meet Dakota Frandsen,” said Ford.

“Hello, I have heard a great deal about you,” she said.

“I would love to give a more appropriate greeting but as you can see my hands are tied,” I replied. To show her the extent of my bindings I lifted my palms, giving a gentle wave. She nodded then left the room to continue her business. Ford held up the folder and grew a slight grin on his face. He was giving off the vibe like a cars salesman coming for a new customer.

“I bet you are wondering what is in this file,” he grinned.

“No, I already know what is it. It has information on the first job you are going to give me if I sign join your ranks.”

His face dropped. A complete guess on my part must have been accurate.

“The drugs should have blocked your powers,” he said.

“Maybe, but I don't need my alternate egos in order to use my abilities. Even monkey minds like yours have ways of fooling itself,” I replied.

My earlier statement was nothing more than a mere guess, at times I have very little idea about the extent of my abilities. Since earlier encounters with Ford's organization almost resulted in my death I needed to portray myself as more powerful than they imagined. Even though they were government affiliated, they are still easy to influence. Perhaps in time, I would be able to run the government without anyone knowing.

Yet inside my mind, I could feel the barricades brought by the drugs fading away. My abilities had returned. My counterparts were still absent from my mind, but enough of me managed to collect itself in order to put up a fight. I clenched my fists together and channeled energy through my arms and legs. Large energy balls pushed themselves through my arms, gathered in my wrists and ankles. With a quick squeeze of my fists the bindings that held me to the chair burst. Mr. Ford jumped back to avoid the shrapnel.

“Take it easy, Dakota,” he shouted.

“Would you relax? The damn things itch,” I told him.

“Fine,” he said catching his breath, “So are you interested?”

“Yes, I am. Just tell me this, is the country's black budget real?”

"Sign up and your living expenses and further projects will get paid by it."

"Cool. Where do I sign up?"

"You pull off this case, you're in."

"Alright, show me what I have to..."

Another needle was pushed into my neck and injected more drugs into my system, silencing my words. I immediately blacked out, so it would be easier for them to ship me. I didn't know where I was or why I was going. Was it to ship me to another facility in the various underground tunnels owned by the United States government?

No, surprisingly enough. I was back at home, lying in bed. My sheets undisturbed as if I was nothing more than a note laid against them. I sat up while brushing down on my face with my right hand, just trying to ease my spinning head. My body felt like it was starved for days. The feeling only stayed for a couple minutes. My cell phone rang in the other room, grasping my attention.

I got up and walked closer to the noise, nearly bumping into everything in the way. I entered my office to find my phone ringing against the desk sitting next to my keys, wallet, and a vanilla folder. The phone displayed Shandra's picture and name. Not acknowledging the mysterious folder, I answered my phone.

"Hello?" I answered.

"Where have you been?" screamed Shandra.

"What do you mean?'

"Dakota, I have been trying to call you for the last five hours. Jessica just got back and she told us that you would check on her but we never heard a single word from you!"

I removed my phone from my ear in order to check the time. The display read, "6:30 p.m." I tried to think back to moments just before the Suits held me captive. It was around one o'clock according to the displays inside a cruiser's dashboard computer. Yet I was drugged to sleep for most of that time.

"Let's just say I was compromised," I told her.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Federal agents tried to interrogate me."

"What? Dakota, you're breaking up. Can you just come here? I really need to see you, we all need to see you."

"Alright, I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Please!"

She hung up the other end of the line. In the moments of silence just before I shut my phone the folder on the desk caught my attention. It was the same folder Agent Ford held during our meeting. I took my hand and gently

opened it to reveal its contents. On top of several photos and other documents was a note that was addressed to me.

It read, “Dakota, I never got to congratulate you on finding your friend. Police haven't found a single lead yet you took down the very guy that was responsible for it all. That being said my organization wishes to recruit you. But in order to do that we need to see you out in the field. In this folder is a typical assignment we are given by superiors. Given the circumstances of your abilities, however, we have decided to assign you something with higher risks. Everything you need to know in is this file.

“Good luck. Ford.”

I had a hard time believing what was happening. I had entered the gates of Hell itself to save a friend only to be greeted by an agency that used Hell as a mask. No one knew the purpose of the Suits. My curiosity was peaked. My only choice was to join their ranks to find the answers so many before me have gotten close to. Only this time, I would have less of a chance of being executed under mysterious circumstances. But if I went on the inside, death would be my only way out.

The thought was nearly impossible to wrap my mind around. Before I could even think about what could be in the file I was reminded of the three girls that needed to see me. I slipped the note back into the file and left it in its original position, grabbed my keys and phone, and walked downstairs. Some reason the house looked different as if I entered a new reality. Everything was where I left it but it just seemed different. As I walked out the front door the same sensations overcame me. The world looked different after seeing someone die. Even if so many were able to move on to a better place, it still felt weird. Perhaps it was nothing, but it was hard to tell. I tried to think of where she could be located, but my thoughts were halted by the presence of my car. The agents were even nice enough to fix up the car and make it appear new.

Then I realized something, Shandra didn't tell me where she was. As I got into my refurbished car I tried to think of everywhere her and Brianna could have gone. I didn't know if Brianna had moved since we broke up. The park I saw her at earlier was our old meeting place because she happened to live near it.

“Maybe she still lives there,” I thought to myself.

I started my car and drove off, just trying to remember how to get to Brianna's house. At the edge of my driveway, I turned left as the path I used to walk would retrace itself before me. Even a few flashbacks decided to make themselves known in order to help me get there. Not a lot has changed other than fresher paint on the streets. About a quarter of a mile away from my place I made a turn into a large cul-de-sac with several trees. A small house with flowers growing into the woodwork around the front deck caught my eye. It wasn't because of a lack of caring for the place. The flowers were actually an intended design that Jessica had me help with when I was still dating Brianna. I didn't see what Jessica's vision was for the place, but now I see something many

people only thought was possible in fairy tales.

"Are you sure you want to go in there?" asked my Shadow Hunter as he and his light counterpart manifested in the backseat.

"Why shouldn't I go in?" I asked.

"Dude, think. Your ex-girlfriend has been hanging with your current girlfriend. Nothing good comes from it."

"At this point, I really don't care. Besides, where have you two been?"

"We couldn't find you, but we knew you were going to be fine so we have been keeping an eye on the girls," said the Light Hunter.

"Fair enough. Now let's regroup before the girls see us."

He nodded his head and shifted into a dark energy ball. My Light Hunter followed suit as they both fused themselves with my soul. I finally had a sense of completion within myself. I have been attached to my alter egos for so long if we become separated for extended, we grew weaker. I always thought that maybe it was possible to hold the strength for much longer, but the power I need would be equal to three Earth's exploding.

Once I felt my egos had settled in, my car was parked just outside the house and I got out. When I slammed the car door, the front door to the house was thrown open and something came running for me. What it was running too fast for me to recognize what, or even who, it was. A force that moved so fast it tackled me to the ground. I let out a heavy grunt as my body hit the sidewalk. The taste of strawberry shampoo scented hair entered my mouth. I spit out the hair and looked down to see who had forced me to the ground. It was Shandra sitting on my lower stomach with her arms and legs draped over my sides. I tried to speak but before any sound could escape Shandra slapped me across the face.

"What happened to you?" she asked.

"The government found out about me and took me to some weird facility," I answered.

"Don't lie to me!"

"I am not. Check my neck, whoever took me had to drug me in order to move me anywhere."

I turned my head to reveal where I felt the needles enter my skin. Two tiny bumps, that almost looked like mosquito bites, rested just underneath my jaw line.

"Will you be okay?" she asked with a tone of guilt.

"Yeah, it was just something to make me fall asleep," I told her.

The next thing I knew I felt Shandra's lips against mine as her hair covered our faces. When she came up for air she whispered, "I was so worried about you," then proceeded to kiss me some more. A couple minutes passed before our lips separated again.

“I know. But don't worry, I will always find a way back home,” I said while desperately trying to comfort her. Our lips met for one final peck before she lifted herself off of me. As I got up I noticed Brianna standing in the doorway.

“Thank you for finding her,” she whispered.

“You're welcome. Is she okay?” I asked.

“Yeah, she is in her room right now.”

Brianna stepped to the side of the doorway, signaling for me to enter. Shandra followed me inside. Except for dust gathered in the paint on the walls, making them appear darker, the house was unchanged since the last time I visited. Old couches with floral designs gathered around a fifty-six-inch television, a pile of dirty dishes sitting inside the kitchen sink, and even tears in the carpets stayed unscratched. It was almost like walking into my own house after being gone for days on end. Nothing was moved from its place. I found the hallway that leads to the bedrooms and searched for Jessica. The slightest of whimpers dug their way through tiny holes in the door at the farthest end of the hallway. I knocked twice and whispered, “Jessica, it's me,” before I walked inside.

Inside the room I found Jessica laying on her bed with her face buried into bright pink pillows. Her room was isolated in a faint gray haze. It was hard to see anything that wasn't exposed by the hallway lights. I wanted to find a light switch just so I could see better, but my gut told me I might as well be tying Giant Hogweed, a plant notorious for sap that burns if exposed to sunlight, around her. She already was covered in wounds, even if they were hard to see, so nonchalantly exposing her to light when all she needs is time alone would cause more harm than good. Thankfully my job is to work in the darkness. Jessica had now fallen silent in my presence.

“How are you holding up?” I asked her.

“Fine,” she whispered as she laid her head on its side. There were two wet streaks on the pillows that lined up with her bloodshot eyes.

“Jess, it's okay to talk. I saw what happened.”

“No, you didn't. You didn't see what was down there.”

“What do you mean?”

“You didn't see them. You didn't see their faces as they died. You didn't see the pain in their eyes when that guy would start grabbing us. There was something down there that watched. When one of us couldn't take it anymore, something was there to take us away. Something evil.”

“Were they the ones growling when I killed the guy that did this to you?”

She paused for a moment and adjusted her head so she could look at me while lying down.

"How did you hear them?" she asked.

"Things have changed since the last time we saw each other. I see things that other people can't see."

"Is that how you found me?"

I nodded my head, "yes". She deserved to know the truth about the person that broke her free.

"I get these visions. Sometimes they show me the future, sometimes they help me look into the past. I have a hard time controlling it, but when they happen it is always something important," I told her. She finally sat up and slid herself across her bed to sit next to me.

"But why me?"

I set my left hand in between us and left it hovering just a couple inches above the sheets. "Grab my hand and we will see," I said. I don't know what compelled me to ask Jessica to do this, it almost seemed impulsive. It happened just about every time I had a "superhuman" episode. It sounds cliché I know, but it was the only title I could think of at the time.

Jessica grabbed my hand and squeezed. A vision colored in blue lights materialized in my eyes. I could see the outlines five people gathered in front of a large building that appeared to be built from scrap metal and tiny lights of several bright colors strung across it. More details became clearer, revealing the identities of the five people. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. In a war-torn area standing in the middle of a small village built from the remains of machines was Jessica, Olivia, and Shandra gathered around me enjoying Christmas decorations. Another woman was hiding behind us that was hard to see. The adults appeared to have aged a little more than a decade and Olivia looked about the age of eight. I was actually glimpsing into the distant future. Olivia was holding a drawing with the words, "Merry Christmas 2026" across the top of the paper. The vision quickly disappeared before I could note any other details.

Jessica noticed something was off about me. I couldn't tell if she saw the vision. "What is it Dakota?" she asked.

I turned to her and said, "It looks like you might be needed in a few years."

She took my answer quite well, at least that is how it seemed. All she did was wrap her arms around me and whispered the words, "Thank you for everything." I wrapped my arms around her for a couple minutes before her sister interrupted the scene.

"Hey, you're finally up," she nearly cheered. Jessica and I broke our bondage so she could greet her sister. We looked towards the doorway to find Brianna and Shandra peeking inside.

"Thanks to Dakota," said Jessica.

"Yeah, he can work miracles if you let him," Shandra joked.

Through the rest of the night, the four of us simply spent the time catching up on lost times until I was asked to leave by Jessica and Brianna's parents. They thanked me for helping their daughter but knowing that we had a history they worried things would turn, “risky” as they put it. I understood their position, but honestly, I couldn't help but grin. I couldn't help but smile at the suggestion they were implying. But I respected their wishes and left. But before I left I was asked by Shandra to speak outside.

The storm clouds looked as if they were ready to spill. A gentle wind grew around us. We stood in the dead center of the yard. My car and the front door were equidistant. I looked into Shandra's eyes to find she was concerned about something.

“Dakota, is everything alright?” she asked.

“It's fine,” I answered.

“Are you sure? When I asked for your help you seemed kinda ticked.”

“It's nothing, Shandra.”

She didn't believe me. I could see her fists clenching together. Her heart began to race with a killer's strength. “Dakota, don't you lie to me!” she screamed. A burst of thunder sounded off in the sky. I jumped a little when I realized what was happening. Perhaps her former Valkyrie allies felt her unsettled heart.

“Shandra, I am not lying!” I yelled.

“Yes, you are! Tell me what is wrong!”

“Fine, you want to know what is wrong?”

“I'm waiting!”

I tried biting my lips, but it was no use. She was wanting to know what was going on, so I told her. “You asking me to find Jessica,” I whispered.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“The only reason I even came because I knew that it was Brianna you were talking about. If it was anybody else I wouldn't have come.”

“Why? If someone needed our help you wouldn't step in? What the hell Dakota?!”

“Shandra, these things aren't always accurate and could get someone killed! Somebody already died when I got there!”

“So what?! When someone comes to us for help we help them!”

“I know but not like this! It would be like making a next of kin call without a body, that is something I cannot do!”

“What do you mean, psychics tell people about dead relatives on T.V all the time!”

“Really, that is your argument? Those morons get things wrong all the

time and everything they see is often easy to find with a web search! When they say somebody who was reported is missing they are making assumptions off of nothing and tell worried families their loved one is dead!"

"Don't you talk to me like that! You know what I mean!"

"Yeah I do but I don't have time for this. I have to be somewhere."

"Fine, go! I don't care!"

"Fine!"

Shandra and I stormed away from each other. In my chest I could feel something starting to rip, a bond slowly withering away. I shouldn't have snapped but she was leaving me no choice. I didn't let my family dictate how I ran things, so I wasn't going to let someone who I have known for a few months decide it either. I know I said I made her a partner and all but there were limits. People don't realize psychics aren't perfect, hell several "psychics" don't realize psychics aren't perfect. They try to become supernatural marksmen and give predictions that are on the money and are willing to risk innocent lives just to make a point. It is the reason I never labeled myself as a psychic, just someone who is "gifted."

I had to acknowledge that there was going to be times where I messed up, especially with that particular argument with Shandra, but I tried my best to avoid hurting anyone. If I did, I would always try to fix things in time. So that is why I avoid having to use my abilities to look for missing people. Don't get me wrong, if I felt that my intervention could lead to finding them, I will always try to look into it on my own accord. I know I should have tried to explain all of this to Shandra, but she was getting irritated to the point the skies threatened to help her take me down. We needed our space. Thankfully there was a job laying in a vanilla folder on top of my desk.

I started up my car and drove home. In the rear view mirror, I watched as Shandra collapsed into Jessica and Brianna. They came outside when they heard when things almost turn into a brawl. I saw the tears running down her face from miles away because they materialized on the face of a little girl who appeared in the shotgun seat.

The urge to stop the car and turn around grew inside me, but I just continued driving forward. Perhaps it was pride that made me do it, so I could send a message. Because of my kindness, people become quick to assume that I would fight with them no matter what they did. So often times my services became taken for granted. But thanks to the diversity of my talents, I had a way to be galaxies away before tensions settled if I felt the need. You don't have to tell me, I know this is pretty harsh and what I did in the next few hours was probably the most arrogant thing I could have done. To this day I still feel guilty about that fight.

When I got home I went straight into my office and checked the time on my phone. The display told me it was eight forty-nine pm. I set down my phone near my computer monitor and took a moment to clear my head. My face

felt hot with tiny trickles emerging from my eyes trying to calm the blaze. I couldn't believe what just happened, Shandra and I just had our first big fight. I tried to brush off my face with my hands so I could look at the contents of the file without ruining them with my crying.

Inside there were seven photographs of a local man. According to profile left in the folder, this man was responsible for hacking into several military databases and was using the information to construct state-of-the-art explosives for use on a nearby nuclear plant and at several undisclosed locations. The target didn't have any known connections to terrorist groups but was still considered dangerous. His name was Clemente Ferri. He stood at five feet nine inches and weighed about two hundred pounds. A photocopy of his driver's license and weapons permit showed he lived in an apartment building on South Aspen Street in apartment 4D. A small white note fell out of the folder and hit the floor. I reached down to pick it up. It was a note from Mr. Ford.

"Mr. Frandsen, I hope you feel this target is worthy enough of your skill set. Ferri is planning on several acts of terrorism including setting off explosives in a few nuclear research facilities. If he is successful there will be several lives lost and projects involving nuclear energy will render the entire Western United States uninhabitable for several thousand years. Our intelligence operatives have managed to discover he plans on releasing the first explosive this Wednesday. Kill him before he gets the chance and you will have access to things beyond your imagination. How you go about doing this is up to you, and our agents will be watching. If we find out anything else the information will be planted into your email account.

"Best of luck, Mr. Ford"

Chapter 10
The Assignment

“I hope you feel this target is worthy enough of your skill set? What the hell is that supposed to mean?” I asked out loud.

It is my first job, I wasn't going to be too picky about any assignments they would put me on. Well, as long as they weren't jobs just for the low guy on the totem pole. Knowing who I was working with, I knew that they wouldn't toss someone of my ability out for a coffee run. Then again, this was the US government I was dealing with.

The government was given blame for various incidents, some even involving terrorist threats, so I was a bit confused about why they would want me to take out the guy. If the target was planning on a nuclear attack, maybe something was in the blast zone that was needed to be preserved. Off the top of my head, I could only think of the hundreds of military bases that would be affected by fallout, if the blast was powerful enough.

But in order to cause damage for the entire western United States, one would need the combination of a fucking huge blast radius, weather conditions, and fallout regions. Maybe this could be achieved by hitting several nuclear facilities, but the circumstances would render an operation like that almost impossible to achieve without the attackers falling victim to radiation poisoning. There was something else going on, I just knew it but I didn't have anything to support my claim.

Perhaps the best bet was to eliminate the target as ordered. If Ferri followed a textbook example then chances were he was a loner. Nobody but his mother would miss him. But unlike an inexperienced teacher who dared to

dabble in criminal sciences after watching too many crime shows on television, I realized that the world does not function as textbooks make it seem. Everything is much more complex. As I continued to look through the files it became clearer what was happening. Clemente Ferri had no known affiliation with terrorist organizations, his only criminal record included a couple speeding tickets, and absolutely nothing else that would make him a suspect of crimes like this. Digging a little further I found a report from a private investigator that may be the inspiration for these crimes. It detailed an incident involving Ferri and his ex-wife after he discovered she was having an affair, which eventually lead to their divorce. Their only child was placed in shared custody, rotating between parents each week, and attended online schooling so he wouldn't miss anything.

Based on the documents the child was a little older than me and his name was John. From what I could tell John was currently with his mother, thus allowing for a greater chance of no witnesses. Being that the outside conditions seemed ideal, I took a couple hours in order to get some ideas on Ferri's day to day habits in order to look for a moment of opportunity.

The best moment was to look for a time when their guard is down. Ferri was known to frequent a bar that was located just a couple blocks from his house, sometimes bringing home some drunk brunette for the night. This would be my time to attack, with the hope that the brunette was too drunk to remember anything. But the paperwork was never enough to understand a person. I needed to find out his exact patterns. What time did he go have a drink? How long did he stay and how much did he drink? Did he meet up with any buddies that could verify when he was killed? How many liked to kick back and enjoy a game of poker at his place after work? Getting to the point, I needed to find out how long it would take for people to realize he was gone. Obviously, the following Saturday, when his child would make the transition from mother to father was going to be a dead giveaway.

Once I was finished looking through the file I got onto my computer and opened up a web browser to check my emails. Before I could see if the Suits had provided any more intelligence on Ferri, my phone went off, also displaying a photo of the caller. Shandra was covered in shades of pink and red as I snuck a kiss right before the photo booth from the mall took our picture during one of our days out together. After a few rings, there was silence, but the phone didn't signal a missed call. Instead, a different tone sounded off, screaming a voicemail was left. Perhaps in its way to tell me to stop being an asshole, my computer decided to freeze. I tried to get it running, but even the mouse decided to be stubborn and not work at all until I listened to Shandra's message.

Out of frustration, the message my electronics obviously tried to send became clearer. In a final push of resistance, I watched as my hand became rubber as it grew and shrank in order to decide whether or not to respond to the situation. In a final push, my fingers wrapped themselves around the phone and unlocked it. I dialed the combination for voicemail followed by my security code and waited for the automated voice on the other end to finally play the message.

“You have one unheard message,” read off the phone. A loud beep nearly pierced my ear drums before the whispered of a drowned voice just barely earning back its breath faded in. Shandra had barely gathered enough strength to make this call, but the splashes of tears from angels could still be heard.

“Dakota, I am so sorry about the fight. I get it. I get that it is hard for you to see the pain that others go through, but I need you to understand what this means to me. I know you saw what happened to my friend after the guy that took Jessica found her. I didn't want you to end up like her,” she cried.

My chest froze after hearing Shandra's voice. A part of her story that I, even with supernatural aid, could not see until I got that phone call was now playing in front and all around me. I saw everything through her eyes.

In the background I could Jessica and Brianna's voices trying to encourage Shandra to reveal everything. The sound of Shandra choking on her tears filled the other end of the line. For every regret that spread through my body, her tears might as well been corrosive acid. I felt my insides crumble away. On the recording, I heard Shandra take a long breath to seal away her crying as if she was trying to say something else. “Just don't leave me, please. I can't lose you now. I just can't. Please, if not for me than for Olivia. Just please I need to see you, soon. I'm so sorry for everything just please come see me,” she cried. As if her crying wasn't enough there was a second voice that followed, perhaps the one that hurt the worst.

“Daddy, please talk to mommy,” cried my little time-traveler. In that moment I hated my actions, but in a weak attempt to lighten the mood a thought came into my head. I knew then that Shandra and Olivia would team up against me in the future. There was no need for a prophetic stone in order to see it.

I set my phone aside and tried getting my computer to function again. My computer might as well have taken a nude trip through the Arctic Circle in order to explain its behavior. “Perhaps I need to do more for her,” I whispered to myself. I watched my computer come back to life as I said those words and giggled the words, “You little shit,” as everything I wanted it to do finally happened.

I guess one has to come to the conclusion that the other people involved in these situations must be important when technology even steps in to make sure the right thing is done. Not the typical “The I Fucked-up Flowers and Chocolates” package, that would be too expected. I wanted to do something most guys wouldn't think of even trying, a way to seal away my image into her mind forever.

My mind began to circle through various images in order to piece together some idea of what to do. The only two items the frequented my thoughts revolved around roses and poetry, but something started to form when an image of a little girl in a princess costume came forward. Perhaps it was to tell me I needed to try a sort of “royal” approach, maybe treat it as if I was to approach a royal. A scroll of some sort would suffice, but not just any rolled up

piece of paper, in place of the rods would be two roses.

A piece of paper decorated with a flower border was tucked underneath my monitor. I didn't know how it got there but was perfect for what I wanted to do. I couldn't just grab a random surface and fill it with random couplets in order to swing an angry woman my way, everything needed to look professional. I reached for a pen as I closed my eyes so my mind would be sealed away for it all, for it was my heart who needed to speak. My hand started moving on its own accord, piecing together a symphony to melt away any thorns around the heart of a rose. When they opened, I read exactly what it said so my mind would know what was coming.

"Shandra,

"How is it that an angel from heaven is able to shred the very threads of my heart with a single tear or leave footprints in the meadows covered with cherry blossoms from a dream? Please do not cry over our times apart for if there ever comes a journey I must take, and you are not able to join me, it will only serve as my reason for coming back so I could be in your arms. No matter the distance I must travel, no matter the trials I must endure, no matter the foes I must face I will always find a way to be at your side. The future has already come to greet us in the form of our own beautiful angel. When she is paired with you together your eyes sing a sweet serenade that stops the world. You illuminate the darkest of worlds and the very privilege to see the lights that dance within your heart is the very last sight I wish to see if ever I should once again meet Death and finally leave. But regardless of what happens; be it if I am surfing the Heavens, battle the flames of Hell, or meet the day where I rejoin the fabrics of the cosmos I will always find a way to be around when you need me. I am forever yours, my Cherry Blossom.

"Dakota"

Gentlemen, that is how you write to a woman.

My letter needed to be something that held a simple message repeated for centuries, in all languages, yet spoken as something new without any aid for its conception. Originality in romantic words has become so disintegrated over time, making a simple hand-written letter an alien concept. Yet perhaps if more people actually took the time to actually write, and I mean actually write, a letter confessing the true colors of the human soul without the acidic mediums brought forth by technology and unintelligent use of popular phrases and texting acronyms then maybe the concept of true love wouldn't be labeled as fantasy. Perhaps it is my interpretation of marriage based on my grandparents that lead me to such conclusions.

You see growing up, it was the success of my grandparent's marriage that I molded my ideas of how love should be. I watched as every other attempted try at a relationship end with nothing but troubles for everyone, and to get to the point I didn't want that. Shandra knew this, but because of her abusive ex-boyfriend, she would worry instinctively begin to worry. Once I had a chance to deliver the note, it would be the first step in reversing those toxic thoughts.

As I logged into my email, I started to wonder how I would balance yet another job on top of everything else I was working on. Trying to hold together a relationship was hard enough, but having to meet the demands of a shadow organization on top of it was going to complicate things to the limits. I couldn't help but play every action movie featuring somebody who lived a double-life that made a turn for the worse, just to picture how it would come crashing down. But before the crash, there was always the one fucked up job seen by unwanted eyes. Knowing the simple fact members of the Suits were responsible for kidnappings and assassinations, my imagination took off with various ideas on how my time with the suits would turn wrong. But of course, with the thoughts of a bloody discovery comes to the demons created by the actions. Judging by the smell of burning flesh that sprouted around me, a demon was coming to visit me. A voice that seemingly originated from thin air whispered, “I know, this is probably a bad time, but you shouldn't worry too much about the girl. Even though she is worried about you, she will be with you for a long time.”

I hadn't heard that voice for a long time. He was attached to my family for four centuries until the war and was the one responsible for my Shadow and Light hunters.

“Abraxon, it has been a while,” I said. Abraxon materialized behind me. He was a very tall man with a slender build, covered by a long black clothing that appeared to triple his size. During his mortal life, he must have dealt with great troubles that stretched his skin in his old age. Paired with nearly rotten teeth that looked like the blades of a shark's jaw, he was the literal personification of nightmares

“Yes, it has. So tell me why is it that you are working with the space monkeys? Those guys dig into shit that can get you killed.”

“These guys must be fucked up if a demon like yourself is warning me about them.”

“Well, I'd guess you could say I know more about the insides of a bad person than most people,” he giggled.

Something about Abraxon's laughter triggered my Shadow Hunter. I felt a dark black ooze fill my veins as he took over. “You are one of the lucky ones to tear them apart,” I growled.

“There is the you I was hoping to speak with! You will be much more useful than your feather head friend,” Abraxon joked.

My Light Hunter sensed the surge in dark energy and decided to manifest in the room so he could monitor the situation. “What is going on here?” he asked.

“I need to talk with you both about the assignment the Suits gave you. Mostly about the sorry sap, Ferri.”

“What about him?”

“The Suits don't give a shit about the rest of the country, the people are

considered nothing more than collateral damage."

"Then why the fuck do they want him dead?"

"He found some information on a massive weapon your country's military is developing. I don't know all the details but it supposedly has enough of a kick to kill everyone in Asia in a single blast."

"A nuke?" I asked.

"No, much worse. Nuclear power is nothing more than an infant compared to this," said Abraxon.

"Something like a Brahmastra?"

The Brahmastra is said to be a nuclear device depicted within an ancient Hindu text known as the Mahabharata. It was a weapon developed by Brahma, the destroyer of worlds. The evidence is rumored to exist in various parts of the middle east that show very high levels of radiation. Many theories, ranging from a meteor to volcanic activity, are tossed around to smooth over the rough patches in the timeline of events historians have in place. But many theories also go against the popular ideas, stating that there isn't any solid evidence to fully support the claims.

"Bigger. If enough juice is poured into the device, the entire planet could be thrown out of orbit. The energy source is hidden somewhere in an air force laboratory here in Idaho," said Abraxon.

"Figures that it would be somewhere around here. Do any of your guys have any more specific details on where to find the source?" I asked.

"It's in the ground. That is all I can tell you."

Before I could say anymore, Abraxon faded away as did my counterparts, leaving me alone to further this endeavor. I leaned back in my chair to mull around all of the theories. Much like how little kids start to ramble on the typical he said she said routine in order to excuse a fight, I was receiving the "this is why, no this is why" justification for high profile deaths. Everyone involved starts screaming their own reasons for why they committed a crime, basing their wording from memories distorted by trauma. I had to somehow find a way to sort the information.

I typed in my login information for my email account and waited for the screen to load. Maybe a few more details would be included in an email sent from someone with the Suits. If anyone was going to send the email, it would have to be Ms. Grey. As I thought of Ford's assistant I began to notice something about her that didn't occur me during our first encounter. Her eyes were awfully large, almost bug-like, yet they were capable of expressing emotion like a typical human. The only possible explanation I came to was from some old abductions stories where children were created from harvested DNA. The abductors were sometimes nice enough to show the abductees the kid that resulted from the procedures. Most of the time, when the operation was done by the extraterrestrials, the hybridization conceived girls. So it wasn't much of a

stretch to assume Ms. Grey was one of the hybrids.

An email sat in my inbox that wasn't marked by a sender and didn't have anything in the subject line. There wasn't even a time-stamp to tell me when the message was sent. I opened the email to reveal its contents, hoping it wasn't a cleverly timed computer virus. Inside was a virtual map with a green line tracing a rather squirrely route through town to Ferri's house. Just underneath the map was a message that read, “I believe you will find this route beneficial. You have until 10 o'clock tonight to get to the wrap-up the package. Feel free to take the time to tie up some stems while on the way.”

I kinda figured that there would be some cryptic language in the message, but going from typical “package delivered” cliché to tying up stems was rather unusual. Were the Suits trying to hint at something? By the sound of the last sentence they were giving me some free time before I had to kill Ferri, but why? I looked closer at the map just to see if I could find any detail that could lead to what the Suits were referencing.

Halfway through the route, a separate green line was traced through a dead end. The map was too small of a scale in order to make out any details, so I looked up a similar one online. I found an aerial view that closely resembled the map I was given. It showed a similar area that was shown in my email, but the online map lacked some of the newer streets. Parts of the route was slightly distorted due to the lack of roads, but a majority of it was the same. Finding the dead that stuck out like a sore thumb, I zoomed in to get a better idea of the location and finally realized the meaning behind the added message. The Suits, at least Ford, was trying to help with my relationship. “Tie up some stems,” was a clever way of saying I should patch things up with Shandra.

“Wait. Were they spying on me when I gave her that nickname?” I asked myself.

I knew the Suits were keeping tabs on me. But remembering a nickname I gave to a girlfriend was almost a method of intimidation. If they ever wanted to catch my attention or get me riled up for a job, they could simply bring it up in the middle of a threat. They obviously knew I have a sensitive spot towards guys beating on girls. It would easily be a way for someone to catch my attention. But still, it was a rather clever way of telling me I should work on my relationships while working.

I looked at the clock on my computer to check the time. It was close to eight. The sun was just barely visible as it tucked itself underneath the horizon. My time was running out to pull off an impossibly convenient job. Except for the one missing detail that bothered me, the weapon. If I just used my hands I would leave too much evidence. Using a gun would simply make too much noise. It is hard to mask a fight without having some sort of evidence literally painting every moment.

Coming to the realization that the traffic was nearly non-existent at this time of day, I grabbed my keys, cell phone, the note for Shandra and made my way outside. The street was empty for miles in both directions, except for a

couple birds resting near the sidewalks. The streetlights along each side of the road and controlling each intersection seemed to grow brighter with each moment just to help make sure every night owl persona in town got to where they needed to be. As I stepped outside my front door, my foot knocked a small white box off of my top landing. I didn't hear any mail delivery guys knock on my door in the hours before, so it was freaking me out a bit trying to guess what the heck could be inside.

I jumped off of my landing and picked up the box. Just to get an idea of what was inside, I held the box up to my ear and gave it a gentle shake. A heavy object was inside, judging by the loud thuds against the cardboard, accompanied by some paper. Thinking that it had something to do with Ferri, I waited until I got into the car before I opened it. As I sat in the front seat and nearly slammed the door shut, I took one of my keys and cut the tape between the folds of the box. I took a deep breath before opening up the box, knowing the moment it was opened I could not turn back. Once I found an old forty-five pistol, partially covered with a folded piece of paper, it was already too late for me to back out. I reached for the paper and gently unfolded it to reveal the contents.

“Make sure to keep your cell phone in the cup holder. Its signal will shift all the traffic lights to green just long enough for you to pass. Dispose of the weapon in the dumpster four blocks from the scene and keep it as clean as possible. There will be an anonymous tip forwarded to the local police station at exactly 10:05 pm. That should give you about half an hour to get yourself cleaned up and into the bed before the sirens start singing. I hope you are a heavy sleeper.

“Ms. Grey”

More poetic language, I should have expected that much. It was typical coded language, but it was awfully direct. To be honest, I didn't mind that the notes were straight to the point, it eliminated the chances of my head boiling over from trying to solve too complex of a puzzle. Ferri was going to die, that much I did know. But how was still up to me, the gun could simply be a tool of interrogation. So no one would get suspicious of my actions, I place the note back into the box and stuck it in my middle console as a message from an unknown number on my phone appeared. I took my phone out of my pocket and opened it up to reveal the contents. Somebody sent me the exact map that appeared in my email.

I took a few minutes to study every twist, every turn, every bump and every fork on the map. I knew the way from my house over to where the girls were staying fairly well because of some of the nearby businesses, but I wasn't familiar with Ferri's area.

Once I was sure of the directions, I locked my phone and set it inside the cup holder as ordered. I gripped the transmission stick and started driving. The street easy to maneuver. Even if I had to pull some stupid maneuvers, it was highly unlikely a police officer would spot me. From seven till ten at the latest officers are typically making sure their families are in bed with locked doors and

windows before the crazies came out at eleven.

The traffic lights acted as predicted. I figured that if something wasn't planted in my phone to cause electrical interference than there must be a series of hackers watching my cell phone signal and switching the colors of the traffic lights as I made my way through town. I couldn't help but notice the looks on people's faces in the couple cars I happened to pass. Perhaps their emotions were hampered by lack of sleep, but it was rather amusing watching their faces drop in shock. It was like showing a small child a magic trick for the first time.

Within minutes I had an opportunity to use one of my own magic tricks. I had my note for Shandra tucked away in my pants pocket, ready for delivery. I pulled it out and read it once again in my mind so I could remember the exact wording for future reference. Just in case she brought it in the future, maybe for a dinner date or even in a sweet moment for a heart to heart conversation, I wanted to be able to recite it all word for word. Because of what I wrote I could not help but think in the third-person perspective after reading it. Inside I could not help but notice two entirely different identities, one that was a clever romantic and the other categorized itself as a babbling idiot that screwed up. Personally, I think of myself as the clever romantic idiot. I know I am going to make some mistakes, and as long as I had a good idea of what I did, I can usually think of something to patch up the scars.

I took a moment to watch the house the girls were in just to get an idea of what was happening on the inside. All of the shades had been closed shut, only letting light from television screens dance through the windows. Through all of the flickering of various colors, I noticed three shadows towards the bottom. My bet was that Jessica and Brianna decided that an evening of romantic comedies and ice cream would be good for Shandra. Which was good for me, they would all be in a decent enough mood to let me do what I needed to do.

I tried to keep the noise down as I left my car with the note in hand. When it came to my “secret letters,” I always tried to keep things quiet just to build some suspense. If actions like these were predicted the meaning of it deteriorates. All relationships need some surprise in order to keep things fresh. Maybe Jessica and Brianna were expecting something to come up since they witnessed the first time I tried using the notes, but oh well. I just hoped they didn't tell Shandra any of the specifics, an advantage of ending things on good terms. Inside the house I noticed two of the shadows begin to stir as one of the neighbor's dog started to yap away after peeking its head out the window. I tried to get a look at the dog but all I could find was a tiny brown dot bouncing around in a nearby window.

“Must be a Chihuahua puppy,” I whispered to myself.

I walked up to the front door of the house, trying my best to be stealthy so the house wouldn't give me away. I raised my fist up against the door to give it a gentle knock, but the thought of Brianna's parents coming to the door quickly caused my arm to holster itself. I knew if I was in their position, having

some guy pop up just as it was getting dark would make me very nervous, especially after getting someone back from a dangerous situation. But worries wouldn't be as intense if she simply popped her head outside to stare at starlight like she usually did when she needed to think about something.

I propped my forehead against the door and closed my eyes. I focused my mind on the image of the girls lying in front of the television, visualizing that a part of me was sneaking up to Jessica's ear so I could perhaps influence her thoughts. Thankfully my control over my astral abilities had become near perfect at the time.

“Come outside for a moment, take a breather,” I whispered.

I watched as she jumped to the sound of my voice. She definitely heard me but was perhaps a little frightened to come outside. I figured she may have thought that a new attacker had come to finish the job.

“It's okay. No one will hurt you,” I reminded her.

The idea seemed to finally plant itself in Jessica's mind. In her mind, the idea to sneak outside was all on her. As long as I was the one who happened to pass by as she stepped out, she was going to be perfectly safe. My astral form retracted to my mind as Jessica walked toward the door. As I heard the doorknob jiggle, I took two steps back so I wouldn't appear as intimidating. The door opened and Jessica stepped out so focused in thought, she was blind to my presence before I said something.

“Hey Jess,” I whispered.

She jumped at the sound of my voice but quickly calmed herself once she realized my identity. “Dakota! You nearly scared me to death! What's up?” she loudly whispered while trying to keep herself from screaming.

“Sorry,” I giggled, “How's Shandra?”

“She is doing okay. She was upset but, after I let her in on your secret, she calmed down a bit.”

“Which secret are we talking?”

“That you always make sure to fix your mistakes.”

“I see.”

I revealed the letter I prepared for Shandra. Once it was out in the open, Jessica's faced changed. She was expecting the note.

“The infamous love letters of Dakota Frandsen are back,” she whispered.

“They never left really. They were just waiting for the right heart to come around.”

I handed over the note to Jessica. As the tips of her fingers graced my palm, I sensed that she was wanting to say something. “I will make sure she gets this,” she whispered.

"Thank you," I whispered. As she started to turn away and walk back into the house I rested my hand on her shoulder and whispered, "Jess."

She quickly turned and wrapped her arms around my sides. "Thank you, for everything," she cried.

"You're welcome," I said trying to console her.

I felt her tears rip through my shirt and gently grace my skin as if they were trying to embrace me as well. "You know, I was always hoped that I would find someone like you," she whispered.

"You will find somebody. Even if I have to smack around a few of them to help you get to that point," I joked.

"I will be sure to keep that in mind."

She turned around and walked back into the house with a smile on her face and the note in her hand. Before she shut the door completely, she gave a gentle wave goodbye. I waved back before I walked back to my car. As my hand began to reach the handle of my car door, I heard a loud squeal of excitement come from the inside of the house. Not a squeal of anger or fear, but excitement. The love letter was the perfect cure for our fight because she was in the right state of mind. Her reaction showed that she truly cared. Knowing this gave me comfort as I got in my car and continued driving towards my target.

While on the drive, my Light Hunter manifested in the shotgun seat. I really couldn't tell why he was there and came alone. He looked concerned about something. "Are you going to be alright?" he asked.

"Yeah, why?"

"Because you need to kill Ferri tonight and having Shandra on your mind could compromise everything."

"I thought you were supposed to be the one that prevents me from killing people."

"Lately you have been ignorant of my presence. I was completely against you killing the man who took Jessica and I was trying to keep you from fighting with Shandra."

"I didn't even know that you were around to see that."

"What are you talking about? I am always around. I could be in Tokyo and still be near you."

"I know. It's just that when you two decide to show up I can normally sense it."

"Humans tend to only sense what they want to, even if they don't realize it."

"Right, so you are going to try to talk me out of killing Ferri?"

"No. I was actually coming to let you know about something that may influence what is going on."

Because my Light Hunter was bound to my soul I could immediately sense the news he was about to share wasn't going to be comforting. “What is it?” I asked, secretly hoping my ideas were wrong.

“There have been several disappearances lately within the other realms. I was asked to visit the higher realms in order to investigate the cause. The chambers up there are putting the blame on demonic agents but nothing is being heard from the other side. Shadow was also called to check in on the lower realms but I haven't sensed him for a few hours,” he said.

“You mean...” I said.

“Yes. Angels have been disappearing.”

A loud bang jumped into the back seat. Light Hunter and I looked back to find our Shadow accomplice battered and out of breath. He was covered with fresh wounds on every visible part of his body.

“What the hell happened to you?” I asked.

“Hell is under attack. They are trying to put the blame on the bird brains from above but nobody has seen anything. I think it was an inside job,” he answered.

“That could explain it. But Hell is always trying to bite itself in the ass. Heaven has agents pulling a disappearing act as well. Even though we can see everything, we didn't even see them leave or any signs an attack took place,” replied my Light Hunter.

“Then how the fuck can you explain what is going on?”

“I don't know what is going on but fighting about it won't help,” I shouted

They both looked towards each other as feuding brothers would after a fight. Even though both of my hunters were crucial to the other one's survival, they always fought as if they were sworn enemies. But honestly, it was nothing more than sibling rivalry because of how connected they both were. Regardless of what was going on, I had to get them focused on the matter at hand.

“Can we focus on Ferri?” I asked.

“Sure. What is the plan?” asked Shadow.

“First, we need to see if the place has any security cameras pointing towards it that could give us away. If there are any cameras one of you needs to put them on a blind loop, so once the investigation continues they won't be able to catch my face,” I ordered, “While I am inside whichever one of you is available needs to keep all of the noises from the house quiet so we don't wake up anybody.”

“Considering that it is a residential neighborhood, it is likely we wouldn't have to deal with any cameras. Maybe a couple toddlers disguised as men with cell phones sticking their noses in places they shouldn't,” growled Shadow Hunter.

“Agreed. If the first reaction to a deadly incident is grabbing the nearest camera, then there are some serious issues in society as it stands,” added Light Hunter

“You don't have to tell me twice. We are on our way to kill someone who will only make a much larger issue for everyone,” I said.

“That is what we came to talk to you about. Ferri has no clue about the power source being monitored by the Suits,” said both of the Hunters.

I slammed on the breaks as I made the last turn on the map. Thankfully my car was the only one on the road, otherwise, the bright red glow from my taillights would have signaled a nasty crash. I couldn't help but feel angry at the possibility I was lied to by Ford. “What do you mean?” I asked.

“The poor bastard has cancer. He got the condition after working a few of the nuclear facilities he is targeting,” answered Shadow Hunter.

“So what is making him a target?”

“He got in trouble for screwing up a few of their machines while he was still a rookie but nothing else. But rumor says he saw something else completely at one of the sites he worked and is threatening to expose it.”

“A weapon?”

“Sort of. A nuclear-powered device armed with technologies way beyond the time.”

“Lemme guess... In the process of this discovery, there was an accident and he was exposed to heavy amounts of radiation.”

“Leading to his belief that society is only going to die because of technology rather than improve it.”

“Technically he ain't wrong. Technology has moved faster than nature can comprehend so there are going to be nasty effects.”

“It is going to get even nastier if we don't keep moving,” added my Light Hunter.

I pressed my foot on the gas pedal and hurried to my destination. My senses started to dull in between the gazes of individual street lamps. The rest of my senses, which normally heightened in times like these, had also withered away to their normal status. I couldn't bring myself to become the heartless monster needed so I wouldn't feel any regrets over the death. The issue of cancer hit close to home because of my grandfather's condition. He too was affected with cancer after getting into some nasty materials at an old warehouse he worked at. The only difference was that my grandfather was exposed to the materials before any regulations were around to prevent illness. Perhaps this was why I decided to find a calm assassination method when I arrived at the target's house.

The map had me park right outside his house. It was rather odd unless they were hoping I would have access to a quick get away once everything was

said and done.

Speaking of safety precautions, a thought occurred to me to help keep myself from being noticed by a nosy neighbor. If there was a chance anyone would sneak out, there was going to be some markers left out in the open. As I grabbed the gun and got out of my car, I scanned the ground to find any traces of cigarettes. Smokers always were the messy types, and not very sneaky, so if any butts were lying around it would be likely one would want to sneak outside for a quick smoke. I also checked for indents in the ground that looked like they could have come from a telescope tripod. The night was clear enough for stargazers to check out the heavens.

As I walked closer to the targeted house, I was comforted by a potential lack of any witnesses. I started to jot down a few things I noticed about the house. The paint on the outside was old and started to fade. A couple windows had large pressure cracks, making them seem fragile to the lightest touch. A metal box was mounted right next to the front door with white characters spelling out, “Clemente Ferri” just below his address. I took just a few more steps to find myself at the doorway. My large body nearly matched the dimensions of a door frame, making myself seem a bit larger. The overall house seemed smaller once I was up against it.

As I raised my arm to knock against the door, I started to feel a tingling sensation in the back of my neck. I used my other arm to check where I felt it originate, the tingling quickly evolved into an electric shock. Every part of me felt as if lightning was ready to shoot out of my body and create a storm more destructive than a volcanic eruption. My body grew numb and pale as the shocks continued. In just a matter of moments, an astral projection of myself shot out of my body and lingered just above my head. I was no longer in control of my physical self. Something crawled inside my body and took over. By the whiteness of my skin, I should have been dead.

I made the projection of myself move in front of my face so I could look into my eyes. The quickest way to tell if someone was being compromised by other entities was to look into their eyes. Something about the way the eyes adjusted made them appear as if they were more animal than human. As the view of my face became clearer, the truth became foggier than ever. There wasn't a subtle change to show an invading presence, instead of “something different” my eyes became completely black. My usual pretty blue eyes were engulfed by two pitch black balls sitting inside my eye sockets. The skin on my arms painted farmer's tan red were seemingly made of plastic that was whiter than a brand new porcelain doll. Whatever was inside my body was definitely not human or animal, it was some sort of monster wearing my skin and body. Somehow I became a Black Eyed Kid.

Black Eyed Kids are mysterious children with pitch black eyes and artificial looking skin. Allegedly, they try to enter people's homes in order to call home or get a drink. It may sound innocent but the appearance and the simple fact that their voices sounded mature and accentless usually frighten any witnesses to the point they immediately run off. Nobody could tell what they

were or where they came from or even why. Nobody even attempted to offer up a theory, other than Black Eyed Kids were actually demons impersonating children. Then again, hardly anybody outside of a position of power realized that corruption has lead to many disturbing projects outside of public knowledge. I should have guessed that something like this would happen, knowing the organization that sent me on this trip had access to powers from beyond the stars.

I tried doing everything I could think of in order to insert my astral self back into my body. I tried to meditate while envisioning myself taking back my body with no success. I tried screaming every anti-demon transcription I could think of in an attempt to perform an exorcism on myself. I even tried ramming into my own head to break through whatever barriers were present and yet still no action. I couldn't tell how or why, but I was locked out of my own body.

Just behind my invaded body, two energy balls manifested in mid-air at my chest level. The outlines of two, nearly identical entities were drawn into reality by electric bolts that would emerge from the manifestations. My Light and Shadow Hunters had emerged to help with killing Ferri but were unaware of the other forces compromising the job.

“Are you ready for this?” asked my Shadow Hunter.

I tried my best to answer him, but for some reason, he couldn't hear me. Even though he was a part of me, he was acting like a completely separate individual. He should have been able to hear the cries of my astral self. My Light Hunter was even acting as if he was clueless to what was going on.

“Dakota, are you alright?” asked my Light Hunter

Both Hunters reached out to my shoulders to catch my attention, unaware of any potential danger. As their fingers graced the fabric of my jacket, bolts of white lightning shot into both of them. The energy caused both of them to change just like I did. But, instead of their respected auras of light and darkness, their appearance was perfect mirror images of what I had become. Set aside the feelings of shock and fear, I couldn't help but feel a sense of revelation. Black Eyed Kids, as well as the Suits, had a habit of appearing in threes, the question was how they got there. I had some ideas to point towards answers, but there was no way to tell under the pressure I was under.

“Dude, what is happening?” asked a familiar voice.

I turned to find astral projections of both my Shadow and Light Hunters. “Our bodies have been compromised. I don't know how I don't know why. But I do know it is about to get nasty,” I shouted.

Right on cue, the first BEK raised his leg and slammed it through the front door. The other two followed suit by sending their fists through chunks of the door that remained. All three stopped for a breath before proceeding to rip the door apart and entering. The neighborhood dogs growled and howled at the noise. The interior lights of every house on the street lit up like flames on gas trails. People opened their front windows and doors to investigate the ruckus. I

looked around to see people reaching for their phones and calling the police. The hit was going to be revealed and my happy ass was going to plastered all over the media as a brutal killer. I had just cleared the air with Shandra, I didn't need this. I didn't need for her to think the only reason I made any attempt to patch things up with her so she would become the lover always denying every accusation targeted towards her significant other.

"What should we do?" asked my Light Hunter.

"There is nothing we can do, at least not like this," grunted my Shadow Hunter.

Two more loud crashes from inside the house drew our attention. The noise sounded almost like glass smashing against someone's skull. "We're in the jaws of the beast comrades, might as well make it puke," I shouted.

I told a truth that was even more correct than I realized at the time. The Suits had just pulled us into a nasty mess, our only options were to see it through, or find a way to sabotage it all. There wasn't much we could do while in the form we were in, but we could still watch over everything. Maybe we could have noticed a way out or some tiny flicker of time where the invaders in our body lost control, just so we could plan something to counter what was happening. As people started to run to the scene, nearly tearing down their own doors and windows in the process, myself and the other astral travelers made our way inside the building. What we saw in there would have filled most minds with nightmares unlike any other.

"Why are you doing this to me?" screamed an older man.

The shouting came from behind us. The way the sound registered made us feel as if someone was being tortured. My astral counterparts started to wander in different directions so we could find the source of troubles. The Hunters left to piece together our escape by checking out the situation all around the outside of the house while I looked for the poor sap getting killed.

"Somebody please help me!" shouted the voice.

I knew I was getting closer to whatever was happening. The sound of the voice was very close, at least within ten feet of my location. I found a short hallway towards the back of the house, that probably lead to the bedroom. Two large thuds against the wall suggested that it was where I needed to be. Some shadows danced on the wall just opposite of an open doorway. I felt almost drawn to the struggle as if it was a night-time delicacy made just for me. As I approached the doorway muffled grunts started to become louder. As I rounded the corner and into the room, I quickly found out why. The three Black Eyed Kids were attacking my target.

"Somebody please help me!" Ferri screamed.

"Shut up," growled the BEKs in unison.

Two of the BEKs had held up Ferri by his frail, bone-thin arms, while the third held a large kitchen knife, covered in blood, to his neck. They had been

cutting deep into his skin, but from where I stood, I couldn't see where the lacerations were made.

"Where is the device?" asked one of them.

"I don't know!" screamed Clemente.

"You are lying to us," said the same entity.

The one that held the knife placed it just underneath Clemente's left ear and quickly flicked his wrist, causing one long cut that stretched to closest tip of his mouth. The separated flesh took a moment before dropping as the blood quickly began to pour. I couldn't help but turn away. I know I came here to kill him, but he didn't deserve torture. In his way, he was trying to save millions of lives from dealing with the hardships of cancer, he wasn't like the man who took Jessica. I wanted to jump in and help Clemente, but couldn't because of the form I was in.

"What are they doing to him?" asked my Shadow Hunter.

Both hunters had joined me in viewing the gruesome spectacle. Both even shared the same feelings towards the matter as I did, we wanted to help the tortured soul.

"Ain't it obvious?" asked my Light Hunter, "They are killing him!"

The BEK doppelganger with the knife stopped and turned to face us. We thought that we couldn't be seen by them, but we were quick to learn that we were wrong. "Now that is an idea," he giggled.

"How did he hear us?" I asked.

The answer to my question quickly became irrelevant as the nine-millimeter pistol, given to me for the job, was drawn and fired. Eight shots were fired, tearing into Clemente's body where ever they flew. Anger started to build inside me, driving me to lunge toward the attackers. Somehow, I was able to grab onto one of the doppelgangers and threw him through the window. My body started to grow and shift into a solid form as the energy inside me created sparks. I didn't know what I was becoming, but I knew I finally had control.

"What the hell?" shouted Shadow Hunter.

"Get pissed. We are going to take these fuckers out," I said.

The Hunters took aim at the remaining two attackers and mimicked my actions, causing the same results to appear. All three of us were beings of lightning, with only slight difference in the color of the sparks dancing around us to tell us apart. Light Hunter shot out white lightning. Shadow Hunter released red lightning. I unleashed blue lightning.

All three of the BEK invaders stood up and stared at what we had become, startled by the fact someone was able to fight them. The outside crowd froze in their places. In their eyes, gods were about to go to war. This was already blown out of proportions, might as well end it with a bang. The leader of the BEKs held up the pistol and fired two shots before the gun clicked at the

third attempt. Two tiny streaks of silver jetted past my ears, making the sound of air being ripped around the bullets echo in my ears.

"Missed me," I taunted.

All three started to growl like the hounds of Hell. Or perhaps a better description would be the heads of Cerberus, the dog of Hades. The way they charged at us, nearly replicated a pack of hungry dogs tripping over themselves to grab a nibble of a tossed out steak. Driven by a hunger for dominance and power both the BEKs and the newly formed Lightning Trinity, comprised of myself and my hunters, went to battle. The crowd that tried to watch as a home in their neighbor fled as the sparks from our bodies struck the gas tanks in the cars our bodies were stuck against. Shrapnel and fires become our swords and shield as all six of us quickly mastered every fighting move that manifested in our minds. For every attack sprung forward by the Lightning Trinity, the Black Eyed Kids had an immediate counter. For every attempt by the Black Eyed Kids to finally end the battle, the Lightning Trinity had a method to fight longer.

I do not know why we kept fighting, we were all on the same frequencies and knew what the others were thinking. Yet, while our every movement shattered everything that came in contact, an animal-like instinct drove our fists further into the bodies of our enemies. Yet our enemies were nothing more than shadow copies of us. We could fight, we could bite, we could spit and slice, nothing mattered at all. We were one and the same. As the fighting began to settle and we all made one last final charge, a bright light emerged from our bodies. Six flares shot outward in random directions, burning holes straight through anything that stood in their way. A few minutes passed before the flares faded out and the light dimmed away, revealing a single body... me. I was finally back into my own body, with only the essence of my Hunters tied to my soul. As I moved my body, the tingling sensation started up again, but would only start when a part of my body was moving. In some ways, it felt that my body was trying to use every nerve available in order to reject a foreign invader. Maybe that is what the Black Eyed Kids are, a form of temporary mutation caused by a virus.

I looked around me to find that the damage caused by the battle wasn't any form of hallucination. It was all very real. The street was filled with pieces glass, metal, and blood from those who stood too close to the fight. Some of the bystanders had to hold together their legs to keep from bleeding out. Flashes of red and blue scanned the entire scene with clicks and snaps emerging from their source. I heard the murmurs of radios and pissed off grunts coming from behind me. Something about the merger of six entities temporally caused some hearing loss and I was barely able to understand what was happening in my surroundings. I turned to face the police lights, just to see how screwed I was. At least a dozen SWAT members, three sheriffs, five sergeants, nine deputies and six detectives from at least four different jurisdictions had guns pointed right at me, with fingers on the trigger. They were pissed and ready to put me down like a rabid dog.

"Dakota, remove your jacket and any weapons you have on you and

put your hands over your head," shouted a familiar voice.

I tried to focus my eyes in order to make out the individual faces in the police crowd getting ready to attack me. It was Jerry, aiming an assault rifle, that was trying to order me.

"We can work this out, just do as I say and this will all end here," he shouted.

I slowly raised my arms just to show I wasn't going to stir up more trouble. I didn't want to fight. I didn't want to blast through the blockade. I didn't want to cause any more problems. A man had died at my hand, even if something else had controlled my hand. It is impossible to plead insanity in Idaho courts, which would be the first spot most attorneys would go to if they got the chance. I was backed into a corner by hungry blue gators, but one's jaw was too sore to open. Jerry was offering a way out without having to get eaten by police policies.

"That is good, now remove any weapons you have on you," encouraged Jerry.

I reached my right hand over spots on my body I felt any unusual bulges. I brushed my hand over the spots I remembered placing my gun, just to find it inside my jacket pocket. While reaching inside, every muscle of every officer nearby was tensing up, oblivious as to whether or not I was going to attack. I wrapped two fingers around the handle and pulled out the weapon. My jacket tried to secure my hand in place as if it knew what was going to happen in the next few moments. In frustration, I jerked my hand out from my jacket, only to be greeted with a sharp hypodermic needle trying to dig its way through my chest. My hands quickly fell numb, causing the pistol to slip from my grip and tumble down the road. My head grew dizzy as I looked down to find a tranquilizer dart lodged in my sternum, quickly injecting chemicals into my bloodstream.

"Okay, you guys are still pissed at me," I weakly joked before collapsing.

I felt moments of pure stillness before regaining consciousness. I couldn't feel the air rushing past my skin. I couldn't hear the sounds of footsteps on the street, or my body landing on it. I could barely even feel my pulse as it slowly faded away. The chemicals in the dart could have easily killed me if it weren't for a shot of adrenaline quickly surging through my arteries thanks to another needle, this time in my arm.

My vision was blurred and my hearing was muffled, but I knew that my body had been moved just how the sounded seemed to bounce from every wall. For some reason, as the sounds became clearer, an image in my mind drew up the conclusion that I was tied down in a room made of glass. Footsteps and voices that hit the right decibels, would cause vibrations similar to a bird flying into a window.

"Good to see that you are awake," whispered a familiar nearby voice.

My vision was still blurry, making the owner of the voice seem like nothing but a blob of different shades of gray. I looked around the room to see if I could make out any more details. Straight across from me stood two figures. My eyes started to clear up enough to help me make out details of my surroundings. The two men were Ford and Jerry standing next to each other with arms folded. The voice near me was Ms. Grey with a pen and notepad in hand. A needle was set on a clear table with tiny wheels at the base.

"Thank you, Sasha, please stick around and take notes. I have a feeling this will be interesting," said Ford.

"Yes sir," said Ms. Grey.

"What is going on?" I asked.

Three chairs rose from the ground near the chair I was braced in. Ronald, Jerry, and Ms. Grey each took a spot. The conversation that was approaching was going to be lengthy.

"Why don't you tell us?" suggested Jerry.

"I am guessing this has something to do with the fight from earlier?"

"Bingo!"

"From what I can tell, the mutation took over and kill the target, but somehow three lightning like humanoids manifested out of thin air and started to fight with the mutants. I find that very interesting. How did that happen?" asked Ford.

"I don't know, to be honest. I am a bit out of it from the injection. Besides what the hell is it with you guys and needles? I am going to end up a fucking junkie in a matter of days!" I said.

"It is how we control our subjects. You are one of our more dangerous subjects. Help us with a few issues with the coming conflict then we will dial down the drugs."

"No! No more drugs or I walk."

I tried to muster up the strength to break through the bracelets securing my body. But as my blood started to push through my veins, my powers failed to manifest. However, my senses started to grow back, allowing me to finally feel the brace that held down my head.

"If only you could," Jerry said.

I paused for a moment when the thought of the officer, who slipped my assistance with criminal justice under the rug, was standing in a government facility.

"What the hell are you doing here Jerry?" I asked.

"You passed initiation, son. It is time you are finally let in on a few secrets that have been running your life these past few years."

"Past few years? What do you mean?"

“We have been keeping an eye on you ever since your incident when you were four. When all of the sudden, after you were killed in a very selfish way to end a custody dispute, you came back and tried to kill the person that hurt you. I remember that was my very first case.”

“Well, I am glad that I could be of some service. So, I am guessing that means that because of the freaky things involved, you got in bed with the Suits.”

“Pretty much. My sister was recruited as well.”

“So is that how you two pushed me through the system?”

“Well yes and no. The Suits have some of the best computer hackers in the world at their disposal. With them at work, files involving you are hardly ever noticed and are quickly tucked away.”

“Alright, you two, we don't have enough time for questions,” interrupted Mr. Ford.

“Just wait a minute, one more question and it's for you Ford,” I shouted.

Ford looked at me with surprise. Nobody had ever spoken to him in the tone, then again, nobody had enough moxie to do so.

“What is it Dakota?” he asked.

“Why is it that you are giving schedules that work in time from Shandra?”

Ford curled his lips inward while contemplating how to answer my question. He gave a gentle nod, crinkling the neck of his shirt and jacket.

“Could you please unlock him, Ms. Grey?” he whispered.

“Yes sir,” she said.

Ms. Grey leaped from her seat to fulfill her orders. There were a series of buttons on the side of the chair she focused on. They must have been to adjust the braces to various prisoners. Once they loosened just enough to let my hands slip through, I sat forward and took a moment to observe my surroundings again. I happen to notice that Jerry had gears nearly grinding themselves dull inside his skull while observing Ford's behavior.

“What's up?” I mouthed to him.

Jerry shrugged his shoulders. He was just about as curious about Ford intentions as I was. Ms. Grey, however, didn't feel any curiosity about the matter. Maybe she already knew the answers. Ford had walked a few paces away while plotting an appropriate response.

“Since we are going to be seeing more of each other, I guess I could share the details about our mutual connections,” he stated.

“Mutual connections,” I whispered to myself.

Nearly a millions thoughts started rushing through my mind, each coming up with a different answer to the question on everyone's mind. What

were the “mutual connections?”

Ford turned to face his ever curious audience in the room and let out a heavy sigh before delivering the news.

“I am Shandra's biological father.”

PROOF

Chapter 11
Fathers Come...

“Wait... you're Shandra's father?” I asked.

“That does explain a lot,” said Jerry.

Ford just stood there, quieter than the whispers of ghosts. He obviously had much more to say but was waiting for the right questions to be asked.

“But that doesn't explain how you knew about me, or anything else for that matter,” I said.

Ford sat back in his chair and took a deep breath. Jerry even sat back to listen in on the story. To be honest, I felt like I should be passing around a big bucket of popcorn as Ford told the story because of the way the information would play itself in my mind. I noticed that Ms. Grey had settled herself as well. It was always hard to read her body language because of their robotic nature.

“I guess, I should begin,” Ford suggested.

“Please do,” Jerry said, “Cause now that I think about you have been shady ever since we met.”

“I guess I am going my job correctly then.”

“So start singing Ford. If we are going to be working together we need to know all the details before anything else moves forward,” I nearly shouted.

“I know, I know. Unfortunately, Dakota, you may not like how begins,” he said.

“How?”

“Iraq, almost seven years ago. I was deployed with your father and the son of a bitch Shandra's mom has been seeing. No offense, but everybody in our unit wanted to empty a clip into both of them.”

“None was taken. So I am guessing they were good buddies?”

“Too close, they bragged about everything they did to their poor girls at home. Your father happened to ramble on about your incident when you were four and the strange circumstances that surrounded it.”

“And that is how you found me?” interrupted Jerry.

“Yes, but let me finish before you force me ahead of myself,” said Ford.

I simply kept quiet because my mind trying to plot where the story could lead. Something about Ford's tone suggested that a tale of desperation and regret was going to be revealed within the next few moments. All I did know, is that Jerry happened to be a rookie when he responded to my incident.

“When I was overseas, I was responsible for monitoring reports of mysterious activities. At first, it seemed like it was to watch out for possible stealth maneuvers from the enemy. However, there were occasions when something rather unusual did emerge, as they did with a lot of major wars throughout history. Most of the time we would brush it off as a civilian aircraft or a bird carrying around a piece of shrapnel,” Ford said just before a long pause.

The look in his eyes quickly became blank, much like a projector screen just before the show. I swore that I could see images quickly flickering in his eyes during the moments of silence that followed, images that weren't reflections of the room. Ford was reliving the moments he was trying to retell in the exact detail he remembered it happened. I tried to dig into his mind to see the images for myself, only managing to see quickly shifting blurs and hear the whispers of gunshots. Before I could receive any more information, Ford blacked out. My mind quickly turned off the feed I managed to intercept images from Ford's mind before I could get any more details. Ford swallowed in a flash of fear like he was going to confess about drug use to a family member, before attempting to continue with the story. He continued to stay silent before Ms. Grey spoke up.

“Mr. Ford? Are you alright?” she asked.

“Yeah I'm fine,” he said, “I got wind of a crash about twenty clicks from my post. Nobody knew exactly what it was but the general belief was that it was a faulty satellite. The orders eventually came in from headquarters to retrieve the satellite and have the tech guys collect any data that was on the system's hard drives. It seemed like a typical operation, but one thing that didn't sit right was that HQ wasn't sure of exact coordinates and they suggested we utilize protocols for radioactive materials in order to track it.”

“Well, certain metals do become heavily charged if they are exposed to the intense heat of crashing through the atmosphere,” I suggested.

"You're right. That was actually my first thought when the orders came through, but something about how it all unfolded just didn't sit right. I wasn't the only one who became curious about what was happening, others that rode in the Humvee I was in. Your father and Downs, Shandra's step-father, seemed awfully excited about the news. Maybe they were science fictions fanatics, I don't know. But what happened when we arrived on the scene would change everything for all of us."

More images flickered in Ford's eyes. What he saw defied any existing definition of the natural order of the world he knew. He wanted to stop talking altogether.

"Ron, keep going man," encouraged Jerry.

Jerry was with the Navy Reserve, and received all of the training but was never deployed. He once told me that his older brother going into the Navy that inspired his decision to follow suit. But once his wife revealed she finally became pregnant with their first-born, he chose to go with the reserve so he could be within a three-hour drive in the event of complications. In some ways, this helped him understand Ford's position in all of this.

"We found the object, and it must have hit hard because it caused a crater about thirty feet deep. Pieces of it were scattered everywhere. We tried everything we could to collect everything but a wind storm was kicking up and was literally trying to bury us. I somehow managed to grab on to a piece of it, but something was very wrong. The material was metallic but it could be crumpled up like paper. Then like some sort of... foam, it would quickly shift itself back into its original shape. I kept it tucked away and had it examined by a field scientist, it didn't bring up anything other than the exact material popping up in several other crash sites, two of them you know about, Dakota," Ford said.

I took a moment to think about Ford's statement. I have heard of several "crashes" where unidentified compounds were located inside an oddly behaving metallic sheeting that was shoved in between the ass cheeks of a curious onlooker of the scene, but only one where a soldier found something that matched the description.

"I have heard about something like that being recovered with the Roswell incident, and a couple reports out of the Black Forest in Germany just before the second World War," I replied.

Ms. Grey slightly jumped when I mentioned the Black Forest crash that took place about eleven years before the Roswell, New Mexico incident. Something about the vibe she gave off indicated, at least to me, that she was personally involved.

"I know. The people I work for were involved in studying everything that was stored on the crafts. Many of the crashes actually had casualties, however, the Black Forest incident actually had one survivor. Ain't that correct, Ms. Grey?" asked Ford.

Either the drugs were still lingering in my system, or the information

was just too overwhelming to handle. I had my ideas about Ms. Grey not being completely human, but what was throwing me off was the implication that I was actually correct! Ms. Grey shivered in the very instance her name was referenced.

"You are correct, Mr. Ford," she acknowledged.

Ford started to nod his head in agreement when a buzzer sounded from his chair. A small tablet was attached to a dock towards the back of the chair, which Ford reached for and began tapping against its surface.

"Shit," he whispered, "We have to get you two out of here."

"What is going on?" asked Jerry.

"The Council is coming. You two can't be here, they think all visible field officers are a sign of laziness and get very temperamental. We have to at least get you walking out the door within the next five minutes or all of our asses will get burned. Ms. Grey, would you please escort our friends here?" asked Ford.

Ms. Grey nodded her head and jumped out of her chair, leaving her clipboard to dance upon its surface after leaping from her hand. She seemed to have possessed the telekinetic ability because her hands did not move in any way in that brief moment. To be honest, compared to everything else that happened later, that moment somehow gave me a sense of what was to come. Inhuman powers of all varieties were slowly swarming the world as we desperately tried to unveil the very secrets that brought them.

Ms. Grey lead Jerry and me through a series of corridors completely made of the same material as the room we just left. Agents, much like Ford, were positioned in each room. Some of them simply sat back and asked questions to whoever happened to be strapped to a chair or used various methods to "politely coax" what they wanted. This wasn't some sort of hidden federal office or even some fucked up torture chamber for high profile criminals. As I let my eyes read my environment I started to piece together what was trying to engulf my presence. I was located in a facility meant to monitor and police activities and phenomena beyond "normal" human capacity. The people in the chairs, in one way or another, were just like me. We were capable of pulling off talents the mainstream knowledge thought only existed in comic books and we were being studied like rats.

Hitler was a huge believer in the paranormal and wanted to even utilize his subjects for war, so the United States brought several of his scientists over to give details about the various experiments conducted. Rumor stands that the those in charge were deeply impressed by what was offered, so they allowed for the experiments to continue under even stricter guidelines. By the look of my surroundings, it was safe to say that the general concept for those guidelines was to recruit some, study all, and dispose of anything that went wrong. The last conclusion came forward as ten bloodied body bags were rolled past me right as Ms. Grey revealed our exit.

"This is your stop," she said.

"Thank you, Sasha. Is there anything else?" Jerry asked.

"Make sure you fill in Dakota on everything else. Ronald has suggested we keep him monitored for what is to come."

"Will do. Take care of yourself."

Ms. Grey nodded her head and walked away. She didn't seem to be accustomed to meaningless "goodbyes" that are a part of typical human activities at the time. But based on her environment she might have misconstrued violent acts as normal and was trying to reject as much contact as possible. Figures that a child from the stars would have more sense in what is wrong on this planet than those who have been here for all of their life.

A large door opened up in front of us. Magnetic locks clicked apart and air pressure slipped through the cracks. Footsteps echoed throughout the hall, making it seem that there was twice the amount of feet wandering around. The drugs must have finally worn off because I was finally able to piece together more of my surroundings. As the gigantic metal slabs tucked themselves away into the foundation, a long hallway with a metallic conveyer belt that ran to a pair of handle-less doors appeared. It was hard to tell, but it looked like something was blocking the exit, like a containment wall. It would be nearly impossible to tell what came through these halls.

"You might want to close your eyes and hold your breath," Jerry warned.

A horn sounded off from a line of speakers implanted in the walls. Whoever was at the other end needed to get our attention for what was coming.

"Please keep your arms out at least five inches from your waist, and keep mouths and eyes shut until directed otherwise. Disinfection screening will begin momentarily," announced a male voice.

Air pumps started pressing against the walls full of tiny holes in the walls exposed themselves, releasing a mist that burned the surface of my skin. I was being exposed to a disinfection spray that must have been used to keep biological contaminants at bay. Maybe there were some tests involving biological warfare and alien viruses that required disinfection protocols to keep the chances of an intergalactic plague from spreading.

In most scenarios, it had been theorized that a legitimate alien visitation would result in an event much like what happened with the Native Americans when Columbus arrived, even if the visitors were benevolent in nature. Some even tossed around the chance that the opposite would happen and a virus, easily curable with our own medicine, could bring about the end of entire worlds. The complexity of the DNA and genetic mutations it would nearly be impossible to predict without testing. Lord knows how many died of infection before preventative measures were put in.

As the conveyer belt started, I followed Jerry's suggestions to keep my

eyes and mouth shut while positioning my arms. The sprays that rushed into our bodies acted as they were trying to pry my mouth open as they burned their way through my lips, leaving a very nasty taste on my tongue. Whatever chemicals were used to make to make the spray might as well be used to clean oil spill for how thorough they search for bacteria and virus cells. Every part of my body was covered by a stinging sensation, much like how hydrogen peroxide reacts to an open wound, during the entire length of the belt ride.

The air pressure soon became lighter as the spray no longer could cover my body in its mists. I opened my eyes and found Jerry and me on the other side of the clear wall. We looked at each other, to see if the other wasn't having any weird side effects to the spray. A clicking noise popped out of a nearby speaker just before the same male voice appeared.

“If you still feel the tingling sensation from the spray, that should fade away within the next few moments. Hopefully, you didn't inhale too much of it,” it said.

“Don't worry, we're good,” Jerry yelled.

I followed Jerry as he pushed through the handle-less doors and entered an office area. Immediately, I began to think that we had just entered an employee only area. I took a quick look around the room I stood and found nothing to suggest that the area was used to bring in anyone that the Suits monitored. In fact, I didn't see any of the Suits that stalked me before I found out about the agency they were a part of. Instead, there were just normal people dressed in corporate casual attire, and wearing headphones with tiny microphones attached, sitting in front of several computers. As I listened to some of their conversations, I realized that this was some sort of call center.

“I bet you are a bit confused,” said Jerry.

“You read my mind. What is this place?” I asked.

“It is what it looks like, a call center. But instead of taking on customer service issues, these people keep on the lookout for any reports of strange events going from ghosts to unclassified animals to weird lights in the sky. If it's legit, and it's freaky, these geniuses catalog it then send the information to the nearest field officer.”

“I see, so what does that make me?”

“I'm not quite sure yet. You are a special case, at least from what I understand. Word is that there is a conflict of agendas involving where to place you.”

“What do you mean?”

Jerry was handed a sheet of paper with very faint writing by one of the phone operators. I could barely make out any details through the back of the paper because the lights from the ceiling couldn't sink through the fibers. Whatever was on that paper caused Jerry to stress out, as noted by his habit of nearly crushing the front of his skull with his own hand out of frustration.

"Alright, you and I need to get out of here. Looks like we have work to do," he sighed.

Jerry handed me the paper so I could read into our instructions. Every country in the world has been avoiding another major war, but nobody knew the full reason. Some put the blame on financial struggles, but very few knew money was the very tip of the iceberg. Based the information in my own files, at least three nations had significant access to influence from the stars. The United States and Russia had joint efforts, even though a majority was swapping around findings. Most of the "leaps" took place after the second world war, but ties to extraterrestrials have been noted throughout history.

Therefore, the tasks that could have been embedded in that sheet of paper could have been extensive. Anything from more assassinations to terrorizing some random looky-loos could have been on there, but surprisingly enough nothing of the sorts was on there. In fact, I was even more surprised to see that it was a call to action letter.

"To all Field Officers,

"In the coming months, there will be struggles across the planet due to currently unknown frequencies originating from several locations from around the globe. At this time, our scientists have been unable to make any progress in identifying the sources of the frequencies, due to the conditions in which they were discovered. Based on the information collected, the frequencies (now being dubbed "The Pings") seem to originate from underwater structures that are a few hundred to a few thousand years old, and their behavior is very similar to a distress beacon. For the most part, they are undetectable to the naked ear. But that hasn't slowed the gradual increase in violent deaths since the frequencies were detected, which has risen to forty-eight deaths a second as of 0200 hours yesterday morning. As for who or what is supposed to receive the signal, that still is a mystery.

"That being said, all agents are hereby ordered to approach future calls with extreme caution. Whether you are dealing with demonic influences or unidentified specimens in the forests, utilize extreme hazard protocol if necessary. Some individuals, and even some wildlife have exhibited bizarre and fatal behavior shortly after exposure to these frequencies when the signal was weak and barely broke the surface of the ocean. Being that these signals have increased in strength, it is expected the behavior will become much more widespread. It is possible that different mental conditions within affected individuals might act as a catalyst for even more potentially dangerous behaviors. We are initiating an order for all intelligence agencies to gradually increase their output so that we may monitor and analyze any potential threats in order to keep the peace. We also ask that you all do the same by keeping an eye out in your surroundings and take action to prevent anything that could evolve into a hostile situation. Legal boundaries have caused our resources to be bound to burning flags, but our full powers cannot come into play until chaos erupts. Don't let that happen.

"The Council."

My eyes met with Jerry's the very instant I was through with reading the letter. He gently shook his head in disbelief. The world was already messy, and it was about to become an all out wasteland just because a few beeps coming from thousands of feet under the ocean driving people nuts. Of course, frequencies of sound and light inducing certain behavior is a legitimate phenomenon, but that wasn't necessarily the issue. The issue was that we already lived in a world where a simple sneeze could stir up a sixty-billion dollar lawsuit, give that a supernatural jump start and you could be looking at mass murders triggered by bad breath.

As my overly creative mind began to spin like slot machines to map possible outcomes, Jerry signaled that I follow him out to his car. We hardly spoke the rest of the time we were located in the facility. I tried to get a decent look at my surroundings, just in case, there was any activity that could foreshadow what was to come. But everything outside of the plastic prison halls resembled a big city office building; with break rooms, leaky water coolers, and cart pushers delivering office mail. As Jerry and I continued through the hallways, I continued searching for anything else that could hint at the secret activities of the government with no success.

"Stay close to me, these doors get picky about who they let through sometimes," Jerry said.

My attention was too distracted by my unfamiliar surroundings to notice that we had arrived at an exit. Jerry moved his hand in front of a card scanner to unlock the door. Gears inside the walls smacked themselves around in the struggle to get the door open. One final thud convinced the automatic hinges to finally open the door, revealing a large parking lot. As I continued to follow Jerry out of the facility, the sunlight nearly melted my eyeballs. The lighting in the building was surprisingly dim compared to natural sunlight, somehow making it seem like we had just crawled out of a deep cave.

As my eyes adjusted, the parking lot started to sprout waves in the distance. The dirt, rocks and the bottoms of distant mountains wiggled in a place like worms on fishing hooks. Jerry had his car parked about thirty feet away. I looked around to see if I could pick out any more details that could indicate what was happening at the base. But truthfully I was a bit more curious about where the base was located. There were no signs near the empty road, no buildings other than the base were in sight, no natural landmarks that looked familiar, no rivers, there wasn't anything around that could tell me exactly where I was. Before he took any more steps towards his car, Jerry glanced over at me and took notice of my curiosity.

"I bet you have quite a few questions," he said.

"A few," I responded, "Like where in the hell are we?"

"Don't worry, we are still in Idaho. It's about a ninety-minute drive from here to home, so you might as well get in the car."

“Fine, but you and I have a lot to talk about, like how you worked those doors.”

“Microchips in my hand, son. One was installed in your hand while you were unconscious.”

My eyes grew inside my skull, nearly exploding from the surprise. The Suits had placed a chip inside me like I was a lost dog. I couldn't believe it until I happened to notice some fresh scar tissue near the space between my right-hand thumb and index finger. I took my other hand and pinched the space around the scar, and quickly found the chip.

“It feels weird,” I commented.

“It will feel like that for a while. Once it turns on, it takes a couple weeks to calibrate and you will start to feel some tingling in your hand,” Jerry warned.

So I didn't look like an idiot feeling up my own hands, I hurried into Jerry's car. He must have been paid well by the Suits, because his rig was a pitch black, luxury car with pitch black leather seats. I was honestly jealous because Jerry's rig was much nicer than my own. The seats pressed against my clothing as I slid into the seat, ready to leave. I started to sort through questions in my mind to ask Jerry, but nothing wanted to seed itself. Jerry jumped in the driver's side and slammed his door before patting against the surface of his pants so he could find his keys.

“So?” he asked.

“So what?” I asked.

“Got anything you want to ask?”

“How much about everything can you tell me?”

“Mostly, how we managed to keep you hidden.”

"Honestly, I think that based on everything that happened, I already have a pretty good idea."

"I figured that you would. But to be honest, I also thought you would ask about your brothers and sisters."

A large bolder dropped in my stomach when Jerry mentioned my family. I had been separated from my siblings for so long that I nearly forgot about them in the chaos.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Ford had my sister keep tabs on them, so he could look for an opening that would allow for them to come home sooner."

I couldn't help but clench my fists at what I was hearing. Child Protective Services made sure that I couldn't see my little brothers and sisters after they were taken, and knowing that they still put up a fight when higher powers intervened was unloading oceans full of salt into the wounds. I may have taken part in acts of vigilante justice, but god damn it I would never do anything

to hurt those kids.

"Did he find one?" I asked, afraid of the answer.

"Yes, but some idiot on the inside made for damn sure it didn't go through. There wasn't much else that could be done without drawing too much attention."

"So there is nothing that can be done?"

"I wouldn't say that," Jerry grinned, "Your brothers are with an awfully neglected home, there might just be an order placed to have them taken to where your youngest sisters are being kept. Because it is probably best to keep them from your other sister and your idiot cousin. No offense."

"None taken. I know it's true," I said. I really couldn't take much offense to the idea. My sister was acting like a complete idiot while in foster care, making it nearly impossible to get my father behind bars. My annoying cousin, who tried to convince her to shut up to shut up about our father sexually assaulting her and the other kids. Wait, did I forget to mention that part?

No matter, it was already too late to do anything. And it was obvious that even with the shadow government's help I wasn't even able to visit the little monsters known as my little brothers and sisters. I even tried to negotiate a way just to see the littlest ones after I heard that CPS was worried I would somehow compromise my sister by seeing her. Yet, as I probably should have expected, I still got shut out. Inevitably, this forced to at least accept the fact that some how this arrangement kept them safe. But truthfully, I was glad to hear that the youngest ones would still be together. They shouldn't have had to deal with any of what was going on. No one should have, but it was a war fought with blind soldiers, always walking into each other. Thankfully I had other activities to keep me distracted.

In my silence, Jerry started the car and drove out of the lot. A series of gates blocked us in while on the drive away, which opened at a wave of Jerry's hand. The chip must be able to unlock certain areas from a distance, but Jerry timed the reaction so he could pretend to possess telekinesis. Yet, when ever he saw my abilities in action he would tense up. I guess messing around with technology was easier for him to comprehend.

My mouth started to quiver a bit as my mind attempted to unscramble the only question that really needed to be answered. One of which split the lines between past demons and future wars.

“So what happens now?” I asked.

Jerry took a deep breath. “In short, we give our current... 'activities' a steroid boost.”

I wasn't exactly sure what he meant because our times together often ended up in a complete mess that mimicked action movies. If someone gave it a steroid boost, the government might as well declare a civil war. We weren't afraid to paralyze a suspect that tries to avoid being arrested, even when we

knew some idiot lawyer would try to gather a lynch mob in order to make a name for themselves because of it. Our actions could have easily put us on the FBI's radar for domestic terrorism if the Suits hadn't cloaked us.

"What do you mean?" I asked him.

"I am pretty sure you know what I mean. With the beeps making people looney, we are going to have to be prepared for anything. Nothing is going to be safe anymore. Kids have to worry about getting shot while at school, babies won't be able to live past three months because of stupid parents, and nobody is gonna trust a cop because the dirty ones get easily discovered," he ranted.

Something clicked in my mind when Jerry mentioned dirty cops. Something that dragged itself against my mind once I realized it was going to be another threat to the overall operation. A hidden force that has completely dissipated from view in the last few days of chaos.

"Jerry, what the hell happened to Cortez?" I asked him, "Was he ever found?"

Jerry took his left hand and smacked it hard against his forehead. "Shit, I completely forgot about him," he grunted.

"A cop is responsible for one of the bloodiest massacres in the area, and he is forgotten about? What in the Hell else happened?"

"It's not like that. Trust me, I wish it was something else."

"What do you mean?"

Jerry took his left hand off his face and started to roll up his sleeve. I watched as three longs lines of stitched up scar tissue, nearly jumping to the tune of Jerry's heartbeat, revealed themselves across the entire length of his arm. The wounds were nearly a couple days old, about the same time Jessica's incident occurred. Something must have happened down where the bodies were located. Once the sleeve was completely rolled up, I could see that the marks were not just any scratches. They were deep, jagged, almost animal-like and worst of all appeared like they came from a heated source.

"Shit, you got tagged," I said while burying my face in my hands. I knew exactly what those cuts came from.

"By what exactly?" he asked.

"A demon."

Jerry's face nearly dropped through the bottom of the car. I couldn't help but think that on some level, he knew what my answer was going to be, but also hoped I would say something else.

"I guess we are really are going to be hosing down Hell, huh?" I asked jokingly.

"Yeah, apparently," he whispered.

I didn't realize it at the time, but Jerry hated the news that we would

have to step up our game to combat what was coming. But in the following months, he had no choice, we had no choice. We were given special gadgets which monitored the Pings Ford warned us about. When the monitors started to pick up any increasing frequencies, we knew to make sure our weapons already had a bullet in the barrel. At first, the chaos that erupted was small scale with occasional schoolyard brawls and incidents of vandalism. The only time I really got involved with those calls was when a friend of mine was targeted. In the meantime I spent my new source of income to fund a few investigations, even bringing Shandra along for a few of them.

As the months went on, the Pings slowly increased in intensity. Each time a spike registered, crimes and supernatural activity followed suit in nearly the same increments. Small fender benders became contests to see who could flatten the most cars. Small whispers from spirits in the shadows became screams from blade-toothed entities. The increases seemed small, so it never drew much attention to media outlets. The ones that did pick up on something were quickly silenced by the government's media monitoring groups, individuals that helped keep some illegal activities of presidential figures at bay.

Because the intensity of crime became too hard to tuck away from the public eye, Shandra became aware of what I did. She saw with her own eyes that I had a dark side, she even saw the face of my Shadow Hunter. I could sense she was somewhat fearful of what she saw but some parts of her made her stick around. She came to know my demons better than most people and still did not run. Often times I could help but think she felt obliged to stick around because I helped her with her own evils, but I never questioned it. I didn't bring it up to avoid sounding like an ass.

But thanks to my silence, Shandra was actually able to help with the Pings without realizing it. In our downtime, Jerry and I tried to map out the affected areas across the planet so we could try to understand the frequencies better. Other agents posted around the globe gave frequent reports on the activity they witnessed within their jurisdictions, which helped pinpoint how and when the Pings stirred up. We quickly found that instead of all the Pings turning up at once, as the Council's letter suggested, but rather followed a circular motion around the planet. Shandra happened to find some of the data I had stored at my desk and suggested that what I was tracking was somehow tied to the phases of the moon.

She helped my line up the frequency time line, which consisted of data collected in the six months after the Council sent out the letter, with a moon phase calendar to test her theory. We were in my office as this revelation came forward to us. The data collected was all gathered onto a document on my computer to make it easier to work with. She helped me find that the spikes actually stirred up according to the moon phases. In regions that see the full moon, the Pings would be much lower in strength. When the moon was hard to spot in the sky, the Pings would become spike even higher than the last occurrences.

Given the patterns we decoded, the best explanation for the phenomena

was that rather than being a distress beacon of some sort, it served kinda like a lighthouse. The only question left was what turned on the light. I forwarded the information to Ford so his tech guys could move forward in finding out who exactly is approaching the "light." I also made sure to leave a side note in the message to let him know that his daughter deserved the credit. He noted back that she would soon get a gift in return, as long as I kept his existence silent. He had to keep everyone he knew under the assumption he was dead in order to keep his job. Within a couple months, he had a portable piano delivered to my house so we could both surprise her for her birthday. She used to have a piano at home she would play all the time until her mother's abusive husband destroyed it in an episode of rage.

In the months after Shandra's birthday, everything was going well. The Pings continued driving people crazy, but by the end of the year all agents were so used to the growing chaos, they were able to prevent most of the major crimes that followed without my assistance. I was mostly ordered to focus on investigations in my area. The Suits had answers for themselves, but they allowed me to do plenty of side work which helped extend their databases. Everything was going well for quite some time. But unfortunate events soon began to corrupt the perfect image, once the snow began to fall.

Chapter 12
And Fathers Go

Twelve. Five. Eleven. Numbers I might as well have sketched into every piece of skin I can find on my body. No, they aren't the numbers of a verse from a religious text. They were actually numbers pertaining to a date of remembrance, a day of great pain. In the weeks before, I had visions in my sleep that tried to warn me that it was coming. I tried to ignore them, but they only became more vivid each night. The dreams had started the very night one of my grandmother's dachshunds, Badger, passed away.

Each night the dreams began with the same images, me playing with the dog in my grandma's backyard. Soon a thick, nearly pitch black, fog settles at one part of the yard. Badger saw the fog and started running towards it like it was calling out to him. I would always ask him, “Badger, what is going on?” He would stop and look at me for a few moments as if he was trying to say something, just before disappearing. Once there was no trace of him, I started seeing images manifesting inside the fog.

The first few days the dreams would taunt my subconscious mind, the new images in the fog started out very blurry. But soon the dreams actually skipped to the new images, at least ones that were much clearer than their predecessors. I saw my family trying to hold back tears, gathered around my grandfather as he lied in bed. My grandfather didn't look good and started mumbling what seemed to be nonsense. After some thought, I realized something that was somewhat disturbing. The night Badger died was also the night those dreams started, but how was it possible? Most importantly, why did it start? That dog knew something was happening and was trying to get

somebody to warn the family.

For almost six years, my grandfather had battled cancer which spread to nearly every spot on his body. Knowing how long his struggle lasted was what caused me to worry. I worried that he was growing tired and would slip away. If only his death was that simple.

The day started out like any other winter day in Idaho, but without any snow. Whatever snow was there had already created several sheets of black ice on the roadways, making it impossible to drive anywhere. Unfortunately for truckers, that day was also windy and caused a few wrecks just outside of town. Because of the mess, police asked that people just stay indoors if they could, but if they had to travel somewhere they needed to show extreme caution.

My plan for the day was to simply sit back and watch a few movies. Ford felt that it was appropriate I took the month off. He didn't give much of an excuse as to why, other than saying that I should take the time to be with present and future family. At first, I wondered if he meant his future granddaughter, but it had been a while since she appeared. I fully planned on spending time with his daughter, and I figured that I had his blessing to do so since I was never put through any father-to-boyfriend interrogation.

Shandra was spending the weekend with her grandparents in Nevada, and there wasn't a good enough cell phone signal for her to make a phone call. She said that there was a hill not too far from their house where she could give me a call, so I made sure to always keep my phone within reach just in case.

I was sitting down on my living room couch when I got the phone call. But as one could probably imagine it wasn't the call I was hoping for. My phone itself seemed to ring out cries of despair while beating against the TV tray I had set up when the call came through right as I was just sitting down to have some breakfast. I set my fork down and peeked at the screen, and feeling somewhat surprised to see her name appear on the ID.

“Hello?” I asked.

“Hey, it's me,” she said awful quietly.

“Mom? What's going on?” I asked, uneasy about what I was about to hear.

“It... it's nothing. Are you heading out to Murtaugh?”

“No,” I said, “Do I need to be?”

“No... it's just that if you were, I was going to... offer you a ride because my rig can handle the weather better.”

I continued to hear the tone in my mother's voice that suggested something was happening, but she was trying to keep it hidden. She might have had decent intentions, but if something was happening that I needed to know about, I would prefer people to be direct in delivering the news. Dancing around information has always been frustrating for me.

“Ma, what's going on?” I asked.

“Nothing, Dakota,” she screamed, “If you don't want to go that's fine!”

I took a deep breath before responding. My mother always had a very nasty temper which made her want to slice throats at every minor mistake in human nature, which only made everyone else want to do the same to her. Everyone tried to keep the peace for the sake of my grandpa's recovery, no matter the strain. The strain became much, but little did I know that she had a decent excuse this time around.

“Daddy,” whispered a childish voice from behind me.

I turned around to face the source of the voice, my long absent daughter. Tears spilled from her eyes as if she knew what was going on. I wanted to ask her what was wrong, but the look on her face tore against my heart strings. She started to walk towards me while stretching out her little arms. Her body slowly faded away as soon as her hands start to inch their way around my legs. Once I could no longer see her, I knew what I needed to say. Something was happening that I needed to be around for, and the one person who traveled through time just to make the point was once again doing so. Acknowledging that there was no use in arguing, I took a deep breath and asked my mother, “What time will you be here?”

“In about twenty minutes,” she said, “I have to go pick up your aunt and cousins first.”

“Okay, see you when you get here.”

The line immediately dropped as I finished my sentence. I couldn't tell if my mother happened to wander into a dead cell area while she was driving around, or if she hung up her phone in frustration. I could hear the sound of her trail blazer's engine in the background, but it was too quiet for her to be driving. She must have been letting it warm up before having to drive around. It was fairly cold, and vehicles always had the nasty habit of amplifying temperatures. Thankfully the temperature had yet to reach the point of freezing vehicle fluids, which it had done so in previous winters.

I spent the next minute waiting to see if my mother called to verify the information. But seeing that she wasn't going to I hurried and finished breakfast without even turning on the television. My television was a nasty prankster that often caused time to flow too fast for me to notice, forcing me to become late to important events. Whatever my mother was calling about was definitely important, so I had to be accurate in timing. I was already mostly dressed, just needed to slip on some socks and shoes. The twenty-minute heads up was enough for me to get it all done and make sure the winter winds wouldn't sneak into my house while I was away.

As I heard my mother pulling into the driveway with the horn screaming my name, I reached for my fedora and leather jacket to wear while on the ride. Little did my family know is that I was trying to piece together a uniform that made me look similar to a shadow entity I had been tracking for a few months, often dubbed “The Hat Man.”

The Hat Man was a shadow being with a very close resemblance to the Suits. All of the other agents I spoke to didn't recognize it but were very familiar with the reports. Not much was known about him, then again nothing much was known about the Suits. My idea, like I mentioned before, was to mimic how it looked to get the spirits to tell me who or what he was. But little did I know, that I was going to learn something much more about the shadow entities.

As I started to peer outside, I could see my cousins, Evan and Curtis, twiddling their thumbs against their handheld video games. Monica and Barbra seemed to be chatting in seven different languages. My aunt was sitting in the front passenger seat, arms folded as if she was frozen in spot. My mother rolled her window down so she could speak.

“You're gonna have to sit in the far back with Curtis. The wind already tried rolling us on the way here,” she shouted.

“Got it,” I said.

I didn't bother arguing with her about my placement. I have always been a big guy so having me in the back would help keep the car from rolling in the extreme conditions. Curtis was also a larger kid, but more in the sense of width rather than height. Maybe he would level out with a couple growth spurts when he got through puberty, maybe be wouldn't, it wouldn't really matter. The simple truth is that he was a big kid and there was no room in the backseat for either one of us.

I walked around to the back of the Trail Blazer and opened the hatchback. Curtis turned his head to face me with a frustrated looked plastered on his face. His character in the video game must've died.

“Hey, Koda,” Curtis grunted.

“Hey, Dakota,” mumbled the rest of the kids.

“Hey, guys. How's it going?” I asked.

“Good,” they all chanted unanimously.

I sometimes wondered if they all functioned with the same brain. Even though none of us were one-hundred percent related, we always seemed to be on similar frequencies. No matter what our mood was, no matter the situation, we always knew what was on our minds. In those moments, I could tell that they were under the impression this run was nothing more than a trip to grandma's house. I sometimes wished that I had that naive, that empty, of a mind. Call it what you want, but the image had plagued me for quite some time. For some, foreseeing trouble is a sign that something could be done to stop it. But in this instance, the tides of time were becoming too strong for the pebbles to settle into the riverbed, nothing could be stopped.

I crawled into the back, next to Curtis, nearly kicking him as I adjusted myself to face the front of the car. Curtis and I needed to pretend that we sat in a third-row seat to avoid being pulled over by the police. But there was very little need to stay still for any reason other than to avoid blocking the driver's vision

because of all the crashes in the area.

“Is everybody settled?” my mom asked.

“Yeah!” the younger kids shouted.

I listened as the wheels began maneuvering from my driveway and onto the road. The tires sounded as if they were unable to grip onto any part of it thanks to the ice, a precursor to the coming events. My minds filtered the images from my eyes and replaced them with bits and pieces of coming futures. There is never a time when the future plots only one course, for it is a wealthy yet curious traveler. Time was always willing to take a few wrong turns just to see what lies in the spaces ahead. However, every fork in sight began at one point, my grandfather's death.

“So Dakota, where's that little girlfriend of yours?” asked my aunt, pulling my attention away from my thoughts.

“She is out of town, visiting her grandparents,” I answered.

I never felt the need to share details of my relationships to anyone, unless they were to offer genuine advice. It's not like I wanted to keep Shandra a secret like I was having an affair. I just felt that certain details should be kept private, at least a lot of the details small kids try to brag about. But in most cases, I simply did not care about the people asking.

“Okay, just thought I'd ask,” she said.

I could nearly hear whimpers in the tone of her voice. Something was up, and nobody was going to let me in on anything. But much like what would happen around Christmas time, I would just listen for subtle hints to find out what was coming. Unfortunately, I found them.

As we drove through the same back road we took thousands of times before, the land seemed much darker. The skies itself wanted to shade the passing of a good man. My grandfather wished for is to keep his illness a secret to avoid losing his job, and the land itself wanted to help fulfill that wish. However, the skies did not weep nor did the Earth come to a still. Life in itself moved on as my body came to a still, forcing my soul to become a weightless observer. Part of my mind projected just outside of the car and took a seat where it would be free to let itself wander.

As the Snake River Canyon came into view, I could hear the calm whispers of waterfalls that peaked through the canyon walls. The river itself tried to help keep the silence to the point it became almost hypnotic. The water wanted to help keep such peace the universe itself could spill its secrets, but the winds tore away those gifts. I tuned in and out my mother and aunt's conversation throughout the entire trip, picking up small details about what was happening.

“According to mom,” whispered my aunt, “he went into the bathroom and collapsed. She is not sure what happened.”

“That can't be good...” mumbled my mother.

They tried everything they could think of in order to keep us from hearing them. For the most part, it worked on the kids but I was able to hear just enough. Something was happening to my grandpa and it wasn't going to be pretty. The mists from my dreams started to slowly manifest around the car as we came closer and closer to my grandparent's house. A poetic symbol of uncertainty would probably be the typical English teacher's interpretation of the events and in some sense, they would be correct. But these were not normal mists, they were the cloaks of the deceased finding their latest recruit.

Old wooden fences holding in young horses, weeds splitting the edges of the road, and old houses quietly breaking away filled my sights; it all seemed like a typical day. Kids in their yards tossing clumps of snow at each other, laughing as each one hit their targets made the air feel cheerful. The only worry that even remotely came across their minds were doggy landmines packed underneath the snow.

It wasn't long until I noticed my mother's rig finally driving up the same hill that lead to my grandparent's house. The loose gravel on the road dinged and tapped the bottom of the Blazer as the front pointed towards the sky. A patch of ice towards the top of the hill lifted away as one of the tires gripped against the road, making the car swerve slightly. My mother, being the subconscious stunt driver she was, managed to use the swerve to park in my grandparent's driveway without damaging anything.

One by one we piled out of my mom's rig. My mother and aunt immediately leaped from their seats and scurried inside the house. Monica and Barbra leaped from the floorboard of the car and skipped their way to the back porch. I popped open the hatchback using a switch from the inside the car and slid outside. Instead of hurrying to see my grandpa, I stayed outside to wait for Evan and Curtis. Even in times of horror, Grandpa would have wanted the kids to be put first. We already knew that there was a chance he was going to die. Regardless of what preparations were in place, this was still the first time they ever lost someone close to them.

As I waited for my cousins, my Light Hunter decided to make an appearance. I hadn't seen him or his counterpart in the seven months before my grandpa's death. I looked towards my cousins, taking comfort in knowing that they didn't notice the other presences. Times seemed to have slowed tremendously, seeing that my cousins behaved as if they were snails moving about their day.

“How are the kids?” he asked.

“Oblivious to what is happening, but they seem to be doing okay. Where have you and Shadow been anyway?” I wondered.

“Ford suspected that you needed to spend the time with family, so he had me and Shadow take care of the assignments.”

“But how? You guys can't even hold much of a physical form, at least not for long.”

“They have yet to give us a lot of details. All I know is that it has something to do with how we reacted to the Black Eyed Kids.”

“Figures. They would try to mess with those forms.”

Shadow slowly rose from the ground next to Light. He stood with his arms crossed and a huge gash across his face. Scar tissue started to bridge together the pieces of skin unaffected by whatever made the blow. But no matter how healed it became, knowing my Shadow Hunter's temper, a much deeper form of my own, it wouldn't be long before something added to the mark.

“So where have you been?” I asked him.

“Chasing up a lead on the disappearances. Factions have started gathering in the lower realms, I almost infiltrated one until an Execution Demon cut me off,” he grunted.

“Abraxon?”

“No, this one was bigger and meaner.”

“The same thing has been happening in the higher realms, except without the slice and dice,” added the Light Hunter.

“Whatever, we still aren't any closer to finding out what is going on!” Shadow screamed.

“Enough!” I ordered, “This will not help anything!”

“He is right,” Light whispered, “Besides, he has more important matters at hand.”

“And Ford will need us soon. It is always around the holidays when people get stupid,” added Shadow as he faded away.

The Light Hunter turned to look me in the eye. His eyes looked sympathetic yet calm as if he was trying to say, “everything will be okay.” I couldn't help notice that this time his stare seemed different from other troubling times, and seemed even more familiar. The look in his eyes was identical to my grandfather when he would try to comfort me. Even with everything that was happening, seeing it was surprisingly comforting.

“Koda,” whispered Evan, “What is going on?”

“I am not sure buddy,” I answered.

“Something doesn't feel right. I know that you feel it too.”

Evan stood at the opening of the car doorway, trying his best to keep from hurting his head. From what I could tell, he was still oblivious to the presence of my Shadow and Light Hunters. But he did feel that something was happening, something awful. I walked right in front of him and leaned in so my mouth would be aligned with his ear. “Just stay close to your friend, Cindy, when this is over,” I told him.

“Why?” he asked.

“Just trust me. You are going to need your girlfriend when this is over.

And to be honest, I just might have to do the same."

Evan nodded his head, "okay." As he got out of the car, I turned to face my Light Hunter, only to find he had faded away. It was obvious I had to take time to be alone in order to deal with this. If my Hunters were around, my senses of death would become overwhelming. I would be able to sense the soul leaving and would trick my physical body into thinking it was dying. A sensation I would have been more than welcome to wait for.

My feet seemed to move by themselves as I walked towards the back door. I had no feeling in my arms or legs, just the sensation of my heart beating against my chest and blood rushing through my head. My mind seemed to jump into the winds and leap through the walls, peering in on my dying grandfather. My hat did its best to block the visions but had very little luck.

As soon as my foot touched the surface of the deck in which sprang from mine and my grandfather's hands, my body started to press through my crowding family members as if they were nothing. I needed to see my grandpa, regardless of what my family thought was best. Secrets could only be kept in the shadows as long as there wasn't someone around who could see in the dark.

I walked down the hallway, that seemed to have grown in size since the last time I visited. But knowing at the end of the hall, laid the entrance to my grandfather's dying breaths. I found him, in a room sanctioned off just for him. In there, the most comfortable bed in the house was made just for him, so the pain from the tumor on his spine would be easier to handle. I find it ironic that a few years before this all happened, the very room he was in used to be my bedroom, the room I would run to in order to deal with my pains. When I was a little kid, I had my own room at my grandparents. It was where I would cry over my elementary and junior high crushes moving away. It was where I would plot vengeance on those I got into fights with, regardless of any relation to them. It was where I would go just to simply be alone. In the large closet that the room held, it was where I tried to end my life, only to meet Olivia.

In just about every scenario I could remember, it would always be my grandpa who would come to make everything better. In fact, my relationship with my grandfather became the type to where I would recognize him as a safe haven, anytime there was trouble he would come around and make it all better. In the years since my grandpa's condition started to grow worse, I tried using ancient healing chants I learned in my supernatural studies to help him get better. I thought maybe I could try to make him better like he had done for me so many times.

But when I saw how frail he had become, how much his illness took him over, I knew it was too late. My grandma sat next to her husband, once so stubborn he could be struck upside the head without being affected. But in that bed, he was nothing more than a quiet skeleton of the man he once was. I could see the pain he was in as a black aura that engulfed his entire body. It was too much for me to bear, so I ran. I did not go far, simply because my ride wasn't going to leave anytime soon. I simply ran outside, to the far back of the yard so

no one could see my tears.

As I ran out, I tried to find where all the kids were hanging out. The boys stayed inside, eyeballing the gaming console while the girls were outside in their own world. Everything seemed normal like it would on any other weekend. A front was being built by subconscious hands, but only covered the weak foundation. President Lincoln once said, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” However, no one ever stopped to consider what happens when the one responsible for building and maintaining the house was gone. I tried learning everything I could from him so that when I reached the age, I would know what to do.

I kept my distance from the house so I wouldn't be hit by the pieces, but took the moments that passed as a chance to reminisce about where I helped my grandpa keep the house in good shape. The back porch I helped piece together, the spots on the roof I helped patch, the floors I helped lay, and the sheds where we stored the tools to make it all happen; it all seemed to wither away in mere moments

“Are you okay, Koda?” asked my sister.

My sister noticed that I had been staring off into space, and somehow noticed I wasn't just zoning off. She somehow knew something was on my mind. 'Maybe there is hope for them when this is over,' I thought to myself.

“I'm okay, kiddo. Go play,” I told her.

“Okay!” she cheered.

So much for having hope in the young ones. As I shook my head at the kids, I swore I could hear my name being called inside the house. I hurried to get inside, just in case it was something important, in case I was needed to save my grandpa.

I nearly busted through the screens on the back door while trying to get inside. I didn't care about what stood in my way, I was going to find a way to save the day. But as my eyes made contact, it immediately felt as if I was nothing more cattle being herded into an empty field. My grandmother, my aunt, and my mother all shouted for me to gather the hounds still alive and hold them all in my grandparent's bedroom. Thankfully all but the one shi-tzu were loyal dachshunds that followed simple commands without too much of a fight. I wanted to tell off my family but bit my tongue instead. I was the only one who knew how to wrangle the kids and the dogs because I was the only one still in a decent condition that actually spent time with them.

“Come on guys, time to go to bed,” I told the dogs.

Judging by their response, even the dogs wanted out of the situation. Each one hurried through the house and ran straight into the bedroom without argument. I honestly thought that the largest of the pack would want to be carried like a baby. He wasn't injured, overweight, or anything of that sort, that was just the way he was. He was nothing more than a muscular mutt with a big heart. Definitely, the type of dog to that a person would like to have around in

times of great sadness. Shortly after the dogs were gathered on the bed, the kids soon entered the room. It wasn't until then that they realized something was wrong.

"Hey Dakota," whispered Evan.

"Hey bud, how are you holding up?" I asked him.

"Okay. I brought you your hat."

Evan had my black fedora in his hand which he quickly handed over to me. I placed the hat on the nightstand next to the bed and found a spot to sit down next to the dogs.

"Thanks, kiddo," I said, "All of you sit down. It is going to be a few minutes."

"Okay," they all mumbled at once.

As the kids all found a spot on our grandparents' bed, I started to hear tense mumbles just outside the room we were sealed in. I only managed to pick out bits of what my aunt was saying, and it only suggested that the worse was happening.

"Yes, I need an ambulance. My dad isn't doing so well, he keeps saying that he sees people that aren't actually around," she said.

"Shit," I whispered. The kids overheard my worries, and all turned their heads to face me.

"What's the matter, Dakota?" asked Curtis.

"Nothing, don't worry about it," I said.

'Why did I just say that?' I asked myself, 'They have a right to know about Grandpa.' The kids had a right to know something was wrong, especially if it involved the man who was the closest to a father figure to all of us. Why did I lie to them?

"Daddy!" a voice cried out.

My head jerked upward, I recognized that voice. As her name began to whisper in my head, time froze as light blue lights emerged from nowhere. Finally, a spirit that both Shandra and I longed to see for quite some time, had appeared.

"Olivia?" I asked.

"Yes, Daddy, it is me," she answered.

She appeared just a few feet from me, but this time something was different. She looked taller, perhaps a couple years older than previous times she manifested. She was also a bit more mature, judging by the sound of her voice. Her clothes appeared faded in color as if they were ill-treated hand-me-downs. Yet, much like her mother, she held a beautiful aurora within her eyes.

"What is it, hun?" I asked her.

“I was practicing... I think you called it ass... trail time travel,” she hesitated to say, smacking her hand against her mouth.

I couldn't help but giggle at my daughter's word struggle. I could see, in the way, her eyes turned to cement after accidentally cursing, that she didn't mean to allow say what she said. I couldn't really do anything about it, she didn't do anything wrong.

“Astral time travel,” I said, “It looks like you are getting pretty good.”

I tried to fake a smile so my daughter wouldn't be able to tell how emotional I was at the time.

“Thanks,” she giggled, “I thought I come back to help you with Grandpa.”

“How can you help? It is already too late to save him,” I said while choking on tears.

She slowly walked closer, extending her little arms and hands to embrace her father. As she came closer, I began to feel the soft touch of her youthful skin gliding over my own. She definitely had more control over her astral form than her younger self, if she was able to make physical contact with me. As her arms tried their best to reach around my body, I started to feel as if my mind and body quickly aged. Olivia was somehow making me become the man that she knew as her father. I didn't seem to age much, but my mind seemed to have leaped forward a little more than a decade. The pain I felt from knowing I was about to lose my grandfather dulled as if I had time to adjust and move on.

“You told me, you wanted to be there to see Grandpa take his last breaths. I can help you do that,” said Olivia.

“How can you do that, sweetie?” I asked.

“You showed me a trick to see things in another person's eyes. You told me that sometimes when you really love someone and they need help, this trick helps find out what happened.”

So I end up teaching her psychic abilities at a young age. That could be good so that she would always know how to make herself stronger. But, knowing what I would do with such abilities, it could have just as easily become a horrible mistake.

“No, I didn't use it to find Christmas presents, Dad!” she yelled.

Obviously, she knew that I would question her uses for my knowledge, but I couldn't really judge. I myself would have done the same thing, and something told me her mother was probably as guilty. It was relaxing to see her cheeks turn a bright cherry red. It not only reminded me of myself and the family I was trying to create; but it reminded me of my brothers, sisters, my cousins and my friends at times when we were all innocent and without worry.

“So what is your plan, kiddo?” I asked Olivia.

“I am just going to walk in. As far as I know, you and mom are the

only ones who can see me. Once I am in the room, everything else will just happen," she answered.

"Okay, do what you gotta do."

The blue lights disappeared in an instant, almost like they were never there in the first place. I could hear Olivia's footsteps leaving the room. The kids in physical form seemed to have zoned themselves off deep into their own minds, with the dogs the following suit. In whatever worlds they were visiting, it sure as hell wasn't full of this misery.

'Okay, Daddy, I'm ready,' whispered Olivia.

I heard Olivia's voice in my head. She didn't want to risk anyone noticing her presence. Even though she was invisible to most people, she could easily be heard if someone was in the right state of mind. My family didn't need to know about her quite yet, hell technically I shouldn't have known.

"Good job, Olivia," I said, "Just give me a minute."

"Okay. You might want to hurry, it is getting really, really bad in here."

"Trust me, kiddo, I wish it wasn't like this."

"I know, Dad."

I could hear my little girl trying to keep herself from crying, even letting out a couple silent chokes. She was trying to be strong even though she technically wasn't alive to see this. Definitely shows that she has the abilities of an empath, someone capable of feeling emotions not originating from herself. It is probably one of the most criticized psychic abilities because everyone is capable of empathy. Well... at least people meant to become healers. It was comforting to know that my daughter was going to be a good person.

But regardless of what the future held, it was still a horrible feeling knowing that my daughter had to see this. How is it that such a little girl has such great power of a man the size of a giant? The sight of my own flesh and blood shedding tears over the man that I knew as a father figure allowed for my worst demons to get a hold of my heart and slowly begin to squeeze. A pain unlike any other was planted into my chest as the connection between me and my daughter grew. I started to see everything she saw, and it wasn't pretty.

Through Olivia's eyes, I could see auras around everyone that was in the room. In a typical day, a person's aura would show a rainbow of colors, each representing certain emotions or thoughts. But everyone in that room, even Olivia, had a black aura. A poisonous, yet uncontrollable color when the day manifests itself in a manner of loss. Everyone emitted a deep, black aura. The only person whose aura didn't present black colors was the only person whose aura was quickly fading away, my grandfather.

"Da...ddy," Olivia cried, "This is really... bad."

As if ordered by Olivia's cries, the hand over my heart began to squeeze even harder. The connection between myself and my daughter tried to cut off as the pain grew stronger. I could hear myself screaming in pain and my cousins

asking, “What is wrong?”

I didn't have the strength to answer them. My focus was keeping the psychic connection strong between myself and my daughter, nothing else. As the connection finally re-established itself I noticed a series of bright white lights started to appear my grandpa.

“Olivia, honey, what are those bright lights?” I asked.

“They're... the angels,” she answered, “They're... the... ones that come for people... too weak or too scared to leave.”

Olivia's cries seemed to have softened up. Before she started to slur her words a bit because of the sadness but now her words were clearer. Her sentences kept breaking because of her tears that managed to escape from her eyes.

“So Heaven does send someone?” I asked her.

“Just watch,” Olivia whispered.

Humanoid shapes formed from the insides of the lights. Each one looked different from the other, some appearing male and others female. Nine bodies in total stood around him, each with the auras that signified peace, love and welcoming emotions. After a few seconds, even more, features appeared which made each body unique. Rather than appearing like celestial beings, they appeared to be normal people cloaked in blinding lights. A male figure that stood in the middle, right at the edge of the bed, stood out from the rest.

“D...ad,” mumbled my grandpa.

“Do... you see them, Daddy?” asked Olivia.

“Yeah, I do kiddo,” I answered.

“You once told me... that only one person comes when you are dying.”

“Looks like I was wrong.”

“Wait! They are doing something.”

Each one of the celestial people standing around my grandfather lifted a single hand and faced their palms towards him. Beams of light emerged from their hands and merged right above my grandpa's chest. Another body formed from the merging lights, only this time in the shape of a small dog.

“Badger?” I asked.

“Who's Badger?” asked Olivia.

“He was my grandparent's dog who died about two weeks ago.”

Sure enough, my suspicions about the dog's identity were correct. The paralyzed dachshund who pretty much served as my grandpa's therapy dog had returned. Olivia and I watched as my grandpa reacted to the discomfort.

“Get the dog off of me, please,” my grandpa begged.

My family all looked at each other, confused yet worried, about what

was happening. At their understanding of death, the moment a weak soul begins rambling nonsense, the one dying was hallucinating. They believed that the “life flashing before your eyes,” phenomena was nothing more than the mind unloading itself before it was forever silenced, and everything that was said afterward was a garbled goodbye. In some sense, it was true, but before my very eyes, I was seeing that the ramblings were triggered by visitations from loved ones who had gone before you. Then they offered the strength to handle the rapid change from body to spirit, just so you can say your last words.

Somehow, Badger served that last purpose. He was somehow able to help my grandpa stay grounded long enough so he could say his goodbyes.

“Please, get the dog off of me. And get the girl out of here,” he moaned.

“What girl?' asked my grandma.

“The one by the closet,” he grunted.

Olivia turned her head to face what was behind her. At the sight of the closet doors, the very ones leading to where we first met, her jaw dropped. I could feel her bones begin to vibrate from the surprise. I myself was thrown off by the sight. Grandpa could see Olivia!

“He can see me?” Olivia asked.

“I can't believe it either,” I answered, “I didn't know it was possible.”

How was it possible? Shandra and I were the only ones who could see our daughter, no one else! Is it because we came close to death so many times, our minds were near the same level as my dying grandfather? Was that the secret to unlocking psychic phenomena? In what seemed like a few silent moments of thought, my grandfather started to act as if he was losing his breath. His breaths were rapid inhales, only allowing about half a second to pass.

“Daddy? What is happening?” cried Olivia.

“I don't know, sweetie. I don't know,” I answered.

In that very same moment, my eyes shifted from Olivia and went straight for my grandfather. The angels that appeared must've heard my, “I don't know” and decided it was for the best that I was informed through a first-hand experience. My body began to feel his pain. Every ache, every breath, every fading sensation behaved as if it was crashing into my body as if I was the one that was dying.

The demons in my chest which held my heart finally reached an arm around my lungs to continue the torture. They quickly squeezed my lungs, making it very difficult to breathe. I was only able to make short, quick breaths to fill the microscopic air bubbles in my lungs.

“O...liv...ia... some... thing... is... hap...pen... ing,” I whispered.

“Daddy!” she cried.

“I... can't... breathe.”

In that moment, the angels all unanimously lifted their arms to face their palms to Heaven. This signaled for my grandfather's soul to leave the body and move on to the next life. But because my astral self was attached to his vision, there was a side effect none of them had foreseen... they drew out my soul.

“Daddy!” screamed Olivia.

My vision soon started to flicker between my astral form and my physical body. My astral form watched as my grandfather's soul squeeze its way out of his chest. My physical body could feel something trying to burst free from my chest. Every sensation between the two bodies quickly merged together and amplified. I could feel in my chest, I could feel in my heart, my grandfather's final heartbeats and breaths. The pain became too much to handle, I couldn't help but scream.

“Daddy?! Are you okay?” cried Olivia.

“Dakota? What's wrong?” asked my cousins.

I wanted to tell them that I was alright, but the truth was I didn't know if I was going to live through this. My soul obviously felt enough of a connection to be able to latch itself onto my grandpa, but there was no way to know how deep the connection was. Was it just enough for me to tell when he was hurt or was it deep enough that I would actually die within moments of his death? There was no way I could tell for sure, without instigating a dangerous situation, and there was no fail-safe in the event the worst scenario possible manifested. The only way to know for sure was happening at that very moment and I had no control.

In the other room, I could hear my grandma screaming once she realized her husband was dying. The sounds of everyone wailing over the loss of my grandfather continued to grow and multiply to the point I could hear nothing but hitch pitched squeals. The kids tried shaking my physical body out of the nightmarish trance I was in, but my mind was too caught up in the moment for it to work. The pain in my chest slowly moved outward, as if some sort of creature was trying to break free. Its claws attempted to slice their way through my skin. In the suspense, my Shadow and Light Hunters appeared right before my physical body to help control the chaos.

“Dude, you look like shit,” whispered Shadow.

“Enough!” Light yelled, “He doesn't have much of a chance if we don't pull him out now!”

Each one placed a hand on the top of my head as if to hold me in place while posing their other hands in a tilted fist. Two rope-like beams of light appeared that ran from my astral self and went straight through my mind. In unison, the Hunters each jerked the rope with all their strength, forcing my astral form back into my physical body. Somehow it was enough to silence the pain... but I noticed something else was wrong.

As my two forms melded back into one, I lost the sense of the

supernatural elements that were at play. I couldn't sense Olivia or the Hunters. I couldn't sense the angelic forces who were responsible for guiding my grandfather into heaven. I couldn't sense the presence of the ones in the very same room I was in. In fact, I could barely feel my own body. All I could feel was cold. Not a sensation that could come from a warm heart competing against the near Arctic cold, but a cold so deep my heart felt as if it was pumping ice throughout my body. As the Arctic winds inside my soul started to fade one last vision appeared before me. I saw heaven.

My god... it was beautiful. I was standing at an old wooden fishing dock. The water underneath was so clear, one could count every fish that swam through. I slowly looked around to simply take in the scenery. The lake itself tucked away in the crevice between two mountains, each covered in the most exotic plants I have ever seen. Several varieties of birds are off in the distance singing the most relaxing tunes. I became so absorbed in the scenery that it took a very familiar bark to jerk me out of the trance. I felt a small nudge on the back of my leg, almost near my foot. Out of the corner of my eye, a very familiar face was staring right at me.

“Badger?” I whispered.

The dog's tail wagged when he heard his name. I kneeled down next to him.

“Hey there, big guy! How ya' doing Badger?” I asked him.

A gigantic smile grew onto Badger's face as I pet and scratched his body. Even though the dog died because of a tennis ball sized bladder stone, he definitely was in a very good mood. A whistle caught the dog's attention and he quickly ran over to the source. It was then that I realized that he was able to use his back legs again.

I looked up to see where the whistle came from. I was immediately blinded by a near hypnotizing, white light. A shadow quickly grew within the light, revealing a very familiar figure. I tried to tune out the light so I could get a better look at the person standing in front of me. Badger stood right next to the figure then turned to face me. Seeing that happen made me realize exactly what was going on.

“Grandpa?” I asked.

“Dakota? How did you get here?” he asked.

“I am not sure how I got here,” I said, “But it sure is beautiful up here.”

My grandpa looked up at the mountain scenery for a few moments. His face almost looked like a small child after arriving at an amusement park for the very first time. A certain vibe that sang in tones of admiration for new sights, much like a tourist visiting a foreign country, gave me the impression that I had arrived before my grandfather.

“It sure is,” he said, “But haven't you seen this all before?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Remember when you had to go to the hospital when you were eleven?” he asked.

“Yeah... what about it?”

“Remember when Grandma was driving you to the ER? You kept coming in and out of sleep?”

I tried thinking back to that day. When I was about eleven years old, I was going into renal failure. It has been hard forgetting that day because it happened Thanksgiving night, a couple months before my birthday. During the day, for some reason, I felt really sick and tired. My entire body felt like acidic oceans splashing on the inside of me, making it so that I wasn't even able to take a single bite. Later that night, right as everybody went to bed, I woke up with these extreme pain in my back. It felt as if somebody was trying to rip me apart from the inside. Well to make a long story short, my grandmother ended up driving me to the emergency room. But something happened when I tried to go to sleep in order to make the pain go away... and I can't believe I had forgotten about it.

I remember falling asleep on the ride and seeing my deceased great-grandfather sitting back in an old rocking chair. The air around us both looked like it was something from a dream, much like it was right then... during my second trip to Heaven.

“You mean that wasn't a dream?” I asked my grandfather.

“You got it,” he answered, “But back then you got out before anything really stuck in your mind. Now, you are staying a bit longer so we can talk.”

“Okay... what is going on?”

“I need you to do me a favor, while I am gone.”

“Alright, what is it?”

“I need you to watch the kids as much as you can. I don't want them getting too upset about what happened.”

“No problem.”

“Are you sure? Because everything that is about to happen will be really tough to handle. It is going to be almost impossible to keep everyone together through all of this.”

Hearing those words come from my grandpa allowed for a deep sense of worry to sprout within my chest.

“Grandpa, what do you mean?” I asked.

“There is going to be a huge fight. As much as I hate to say this but it will get very ugly. Things will be said that no one ever deserves to hear that will cause everything to fall apart. I need you to make sure at least the kids stay together, no matter what happens. It won't be easy,” he answered.

In my head, I start to hear the voices of my family members constantly fighting without any real reason. Pointless and near childish arguments and

accusations that seemed come from every direction. Grandpa was right, this fight wasn't going to be pretty.

"Okay. Is there anything else?" I asked.

"Yes there is, actually," he answered, "I understand that you have your own life to worry about as well, so please make sure that you don't forget about Shandra."

"Is something going to happen to her?!" I nearly screeched.

In my heart, I was hoping that my grandfather was simply telling me to be the best boyfriend that I could be. But, judging by the look on his face, my heart sank knowing that he was warning me about something turning for the worst.

"A lot of bad things are going to happen to everyone," he said, "You need to make sure that she never leaves your sight when the worst of it all starts to happen."

"Okay, I will. I promise," I said.

Grandpa just simply smile and said, "I know you will. See you later."

I was absorbed into the blinding white light that stood behind my grandfather before I had a chance to say anything else. Everything quickly faded to darkness as my soul made its way back to my body. I guess Heaven didn't have visiting hours.

My soul became curious as to where it was located. Everything had happened so quickly, it wasn't sure if everything had settled down. So to ease the suspense, my soul gently opened my eyes for me only to reveal that we were back in my grandparent's bedroom and it seemed like nothing had happened during the brief moments I had spoken with my grandfather in Heaven. In fact, it had appeared that absolutely no time had passed at all. My ears couldn't pick up any sound as my body calibrated itself back into this physical world. As the calibrations completed, there was only one thing I could hear.

"Dakota? What is going on?" asked all of the kids.

"Guys," I whispered, "Grandpa's dead."

The kids fell silent. I couldn't tell if they didn't believe me, or were too overwhelmed by the news because they did. The room itself became so quiet, I could hear everyone's heartbeats. Footsteps crept towards the door of my grandparent's room. The door knob turning caught our attention. My aunt was coming in to deliver the news that I had already received. She was trying everything she could not cry in front of us, but only so she would be able to speak clearly enough for us to hear. As she stepped into the room, she shut the door right behind her. Apparently, the paramedics had arrived to take the body and she wanted us to remain in the room so we wouldn't be in their way.

"Kids," she whispered, "Grandpa just died."

The news finally got through to the others. In unison, they all started to

cry. I tried my best to hold it in but hearing the cries of small children broke through the already weak barriers I had in place. Tears had already sprung from my eyes, but hearing the kids nearly scream like they did nearly drain the entire oceans of the world through my eyes. In a single blow, all of us were losing the closest image to a father that we all knew. Even though I had the knowledge to know that he would return, and the ability to sense him, it still felt the same. I was losing one of the most important people in my life, the one who was the most supportive of my decisions. The one person that allowed me to simply become me was gone!

"Can we get out of here, yet?" I asked.

"No, not yet," my aunt answered, "Just wait a little bit longer for the ambulance to get out of here."

I wanted to see my grandfather, just one last time. Not as a spirit that would fade away within moments of spotting him, but as a living person. But instead of bursting through the door so I have my chance to say my goodbyes, I decided to stay put. Everyone was already going to be emotional as is, there was no need to drive salt into the fresh wounds.

As my aunt walked out of the room, the kids continued to express their sorrows. A bright blue light emerged from in front of me and from it, Olivia emerged. She herself was too scared of what she saw. I couldn't bear to see all of them like that. One idea came to mind that could help ease the transition.

"Group hug, guys," I whispered.

The kids needed to acknowledge right away that we were going to stick through this as soon as possible before they grew apart too early. They were all still kids, and since I was the oldest and was the one to grow up the fastest, they all still had time to simply be kids. Tragedy always has a nasty way of pushing people to places they shouldn't be, and I was going to make sure that it didn't happen to the kids.

At first, they all rejected the idea. Each one of them wanted to tuck away in their own separate holes in the ground. Who would blame them? But I couldn't let them do that because of the promise I made to my grandfather. I looked over to Olivia then to my cousin, Monica, thinking that they would be the ones to jump right in. In a matter of moments, my thoughts were proven correct as they both latched onto my body at the same time. Soon, Evan and Barbra added to the unspoken pact to never separate. I adjusted my arms so I could fully embrace all of the kids at once, which is when I realized that one of them had yet to make their way into the group.

"Curtis, come over here bud," I said to him.

Curtis had his head tucked between his legs. He grunted and shook his head, "no," when I told him to join the rest of us. In that moment, I didn't care about any so-called anxiety disorder he had. Yes, situations like that can make even the slightest hints of human contact a living nightmare. But, what he needed was to be with his family, even if I had to yank him from the hole he

already burrowed himself into just to make it happen.

“Curtis, come on bud. I know it hurts but you can't handle this alone,” I told him.

“Brother, just do it,” added Evan.

Instead of a grunt, he let out a high pitched whine while nodding his head. The little shit was always stubborn when he was having a bad day. Unfortunately for him, I was the same way. It was a family trait that sprung from our grandpa, but some of us had a better grip on it so we could swing circumstances in our favor. One of those people being me, after seeing my grandfather in action a few times. So without saying another word, I simply stretched my arm out just far enough so I could drag him into the group. Curtis tried to fight joining in the huddle, but I was able to tip him in our direction with very little effort.

Once all of the children were together, I tried out a psychic protection trick to help the kids make it through this. In my chest, a bright white light emerged and slowly grew around all of us. This was meant to protect us all from the negative energy that would consume the rest of my family. Ask just about any funeral director, they'll back me up on this. The negative energy around death tends to bring sickness and misery to those that don't hold on to some string of reality, sometimes, even more, people end up dying.

I gave one last squeeze before letting go just so the positive energies would seal themselves into all of the souls that participated. As we all separated, I watched the light hold steady in the kids that voluntarily joined the group hug. Inside Curtis, the light I put through all of the kids... disappeared. When the fallout of my grandfather's death came around, he was going to be the most hurt out of all of us. Being that he always had mental issues, more so than the rest of us, I worried that the emotion from what happened would drive him to a very dangerous breaking point. By that point in time, I already broke through that barrier when I let my feelings towards my friend, Jessica, drive me to the point I killed the man that hurt her.

Huh... I guess Curtis and I weren't so different after all.

But the fact that I had already seen it happen, or better yet 'I lived through it,' I knew better than most people what happens when you let your emotions drive you that far. When the emotions lead to a path that helps you save someone, you create a bond (or a very close attachment) unlike any other. However, when you kill only to kill, it will lead you to traps later in life in which you cannot escape. That is why the most unanimously accepted form of killing is when it was a last resort in order to save an innocent life.

But Curtis, on the other hand, was unable to form any sort of loving connection to anyone other than his own mother, which only made things more frightening. I knew that he was capable of hurting someone, I've seen it happen. Unfortunately, there was nothing I could do at the time, but wait on the sidelines just in case something did happen.

That being said, I stood up from the bed to shake off the emotion. It didn't feel right digging myself into those emotions in front of the kids. I was the oldest. I was supposed to be the strongest. I couldn't let them see me like this. I wiped the tears off of my face while convincing the kids to not cry so much. They all knew the same truth. Grandpa wouldn't want us to cry over something that happened to him.

About half an hour later, the ambulance finally cleared the area and we were allowed to leave. I let the kids go through first, just to get one last psychic reading from each one. Olivia had faded away, hopefully to her own time. Monica was consumed by feelings of confusion, she was way too young to come close to understanding what had happened. Evan and Barbara were replaying their best memories of our grandpa. Curtis, I had a hard time reading since he was trying his best to block out the world. The dogs all tried to keep up the best of spirits, but dealing with the loss of their owner nearly set up fortresses of darkness in their hearts. Somehow, I didn't know how all of them were going to be okay.

We all followed a single file line through the house. We weren't ordered to do so, it was a mindless reaction. The entire house felt as if a bomb went off and we were the lone survivors assessing the damage. Heck, it nearly felt like the entire town was in the blast zone, nothing there was ever going to be the same. Everyone else in my family stood still, like shadows burned into the walls. No one was able to move or speak, even as my mom and aunt started packing up to leave. The kids all grabbed their things while I looked through my pockets to make sure I wasn't leaving anything behind. Then I realized that I had left my hat on the nightstand in my grandparent's bedroom. Without saying a word, I hurried to the room so I wouldn't delay the ride home.

As I peeked inside the room, there was a large man sitting on the bed. The man was a little larger than me, and with several scars covering just about every bit of visible skin. A gentle white glow surrounded the hat and was slowly sinking into it.

“Make sure you keep the hat on,” he whispered, “It will help block the negative energy.”

The hat floated by itself to the top of my head. I was confused about why this was happening. I was mostly confused about who I was looking and what the HELL he did to my hat!

“Who are you?” I asked.

He lifted his head and revealed his face. Seeing what he looked like only drove the confusion to all new heights. The man on the bed was ME!

“What the hell?” I whispered.

I looked straight into my (or his) own eyes. Inside was no indication of a conscious soul at work. In fact, under the normal circumstances (and if I wasn't looking at an older version of myself) I would have sworn that he (or I) was sleepwalking.

“Don't worry about me. Just go to Shandra, she won't be around much longer,” he said as he faded away.

I checked inside the hat when I felt an unusual lump. There was a present left for me by my other self, an amulet. One with unusual markings that seemed to be partially comprised of Nordic, Chinese, Arabic and Hindu symbols. However, at the dead center was one symbol that I recognized before any others. Dead center was the logo I designed for my team. There wasn't anything nearby to describe what the amulet was supposed to do.

Without any chance of continuing to speak with the other me to find out what was going on, I hurried out to the back room where my mom was waiting. Everyone glared at me as if they were mentally trying to skin me alive, all for making sure I didn't forget my hat. My uncle tried to rip my hat off my head, just to start playing an alpha dog. I grabbed his wrist and slammed it into the nearby counter top. He and his brother had a very nasty habit of playing alpha dog whenever my grandpa was away. Someone needed to step up against them, now that my grandfather wouldn't be able to smack them upside the head. But... that person wasn't me.

I had more important matters to attend to other than grown ass men acting like small children. The latest strings of warnings about the war focused around Shandra and I needed to find out why. Even if I had to enlist the help of the Suits by passing this bit of information to Shandra's long lost father so he would organize his own armies to protect her. I wasn't going to let anything happen to her, especially after what happened to Jessica.

As I left my grandparent's house with my family, the warnings surrounding Shandra wouldn't escape my mind. All of the possibilities of what could happen, tormented and tortured my mind. I couldn't let anything happen to her, not after knowing what she has been through already. I tried to implant the thought into my head that she was much stronger now, but what if the next big battle was too much for her? What if it would kill her?!

'Relax,' I thought to myself.

I needed to relax. In the state my mind was in, because of my grandfather's death, I could easily make matters much worse without lifting a finger. All I needed to do was keep a close eye on Shandra for the next few months. There was a very likely chance that she wouldn't be able to even see her attacker! I had to be ready for anything.

My thoughts about how to keep Shandra safe seemed to make the trip back home run short. I didn't remember any part of that trip, other than getting both in and out of my mom's rig. Which was fine, I didn't want to deal with my family. I just wanted some moments of isolation. No one around to ask if I was okay, no one to extend their hand out. I could let myself sink into reality without anyone trying to keep me from drowning. I had a reason to swim to the surface when I was needed. But just so I had some time to recover, all I wanted to do was to simply drift downstream. The only time I would interfere with where the waters lead me, is when I noticed I would end up slamming into rocks.

But that all changed when I noticed that my front door was opened a crack. I remember making sure it was both shut and locked before I left, so somebody had to be inside. As I walked closer to the door, the sound of my mother's rig driving away lured out the sound of the television. I slowly crept into the house just to catch the intruder by surprise. I may be big but I can be sneaky.

Inside the house, everything seemed fine. Everything except the controllers for the television and the game console was in the same place. A heavy marshmallow white and pink jacket was laying on the couch, one built for someone with not a lot of meat on their bones. My tensions eased a bit, realizing I knew exactly who was home. Even though I wasn't expecting her to be back in town for another couple of days. Well, at least she still had the key I gave her.

The back door leading to the miniature animal shelter in my backyard popped open. Shandra, with a huge bag of dog food at her side, struggled to get through the door that kept trying to shut on her. I hurried over to the door to give her a hand. A soon as I got there, she jumped while nearly spilling the dog food.

“Hey you,” I said.

“Hey, Dakota!” she gasped, “I tried calling to let you know I was back early but you didn't answer.”

I took the bag from her hand and placed it in a closet near the door. She drew a straight line with her finger across my back, signifying she was wanting a kiss. When I didn't lean back into position, she finally realizes something was wrong.

“Dakota, is everything okay?” she asked.

I shook my head. It still hurt to even acknowledge what happened, even with someone I shared a close relationship. Shandra was going to find a way to bring it out, that was no secret. It was alright, I'd much rather talk with her about what happened.

She wrapped her arms around me and squeezed. Her cheek pressed against my chest. My heart beats caressed her face. I could feel her mind trying to piece together how to ask about what happened.

'I wonder what happened,' she said telepathically.

'I just watched my grandfather die,' I answered, 'Cancer finally killed him.'

“I don't know if I could ever get used to that,” she joked.

“Trust me, after what happened today, it's only going to get weirder.”

Shandra pulled her head away from my chest and looked me straight in the eye. I studied each thread of her eye to find out she was worried. I wasn't surprised at her reaction, it was widely believed by many that if you saw the angels that whisked away the dead, you would soon join them on that journey. Thankfully I had enough insurance from my loved ones on the other side to know that was not the case for me.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

I gave a gentle smile and kissed her on the forehead. "Let me just take a moment first," I whispered, "So I can get my thoughts straightened out."

"Okay... I'll be in the bedroom waiting for you."

Shandra jumped up for a quick kiss on my lips to try to brighten my day. In some way, seeing her did help me feel better but I still had trouble finding the right words. How could I tell someone that I had just seen Heaven? Somehow the idea seemed so hard to even though I have seen time travel, ghosts, and all sorts of things that supposedly didn't exist. Somehow the thought was hard to wrap around my head even though I knew how to read the thoughts of others.

I hurried over to the sink and turned on the faucet while Shandra made her way up the stairs. I cupped my hands underneath the cold water and splashed it against my face. If I went upstairs in the state of mind I was in, I would have rambled worse than a drunk auctioneer.

As the water dripped down my face, I took a couple deep breaths to absorb the new reality. I had lost the man who was my father, and upstairs was the woman that was going to help me become the man he was.

I took a dish towel and quickly scrubbed the remaining water off my face, and threw the towel to the side as I made my way upstairs. Every step I took up the stairs became quieter than the first. I soon was at the doorway leading into my bedroom. My eyes locked with Shandra as she laid in my bed wearing one of my old t-shirts as pajamas. Her arm was tucked under her side. Her hair hidden behind her shoulder, all except for one strip which floated near her eye. This image of her burned into my mind, as one of the times she looked the most beautiful.

"Is everything okay?" she asked.

I slowly walked over to the bed and laid down next to her. My head landed where my lips lined up with her cheeks. Temptation grew in my heart to lean in slowly for a long slow kiss to keep her from hearing the story. But she had the right to know that she may soon be in danger, regardless of whether or not I was able to stop it from happening.

"It's okay to tell me what happened," she whispered, "You can tell me anything."

I closed my eyes as I tried to dig up the truth. If I was going to protect, she would need to know more about what has been happening behind the scenes. I worried about what would happen if I spilled everything I knew, especially that I knew her biological father was still alive. Would she try to leave me out of anger? Would she panic and nearly skin me alive trying to find out more information than I was able to give her?

Swallowing every scenario I could think of, I finally took a breath and let the truth flow from my lips in whatever form it chose.

“I don't know how,” I whispered, “But I was able to follow my grandpa into heaven when he died.”

“That's amazing!” she nearly shouted, “At least you got to see that he was doing okay.”

She was trying to lift the mood, but she wasn't letting me get through the story before she voiced her opinion. I quickly sat up on the bed, covering my eyes as tears started to roll.

“Shandra, he told me that something horrible was going to happen to you,” I said.

She froze in place. “What do you mean?” she asked.

I told her everything. I told her how I felt my grandfather's soul leaving this world. I told her about my Light and Shadow hunters stepping in to make sure I didn't die with my grandfather. I told her that just about every supernatural resource in my sight told me that I should keep her close. I even told her that I had suspicions about a shadow organization potentially being the source of the threats (leaving out that her real father and I both had been working for them).

As I expected, she panicked once I delivered all the news I could to her. Her mind was bringing out the emotions from every pain she felt in her life to the surface. I tried everything I can to hold her in place to keep her from hurting herself, and swearing on my life that I would make sure that nothing was going to happen to her. For the next year after that, I kept my promise to her.

Chapter 13
Fast Forward A Year

A couple months after my grandpa died, Shandra decided that she wanted to move into my place. Her mother was okay with the arrangement, only cause Shandra told her the move was so she was able to better build a life for herself. In truth, Shandra was still afraid for her life, and no matter how many times I tried to convince her otherwise, we eventually became joined at the hip. At first, it was a bit much but I knew that after a while she would relax a bit and start going off on her own. While I waited for that day to happen, I took Shandra on more paranormal investigations. Two of the cases, little did Shandra know, were the first battles of the war.

The first case started as a demonic disturbance in a house a few miles from Murtaugh. The client initially reported that she would hear several strange footsteps, but after some work, Shandra and I managed to find a sealed off well in the basement of the house. The well itself was surrounded by a dark red aura, and if you stood on it, you would get the sensation that something was dragging you into the ground. My psychic visions and confirmation from a spirit revealed that a body was inside the well itself... and it was a sealed off portal to Hell.

But that didn't stop Abraxon from coming through to give me a warning about a visitor from the sky being just outside the house. I went to investigate his claim, only to be absorbed into a ship and given a strange weapon by an extraterrestrial by the name of Ashtar. This weapon was capable of shifting itself into any form I could think of and would never run out of ammo.

It wasn't long though before I had the chance to test it. Just outside the ship, several Suits had surrounded us and fired. They were trying to shoot us out of the sky! Ashtar immediately ejected me from his ship, allowing me to return

fire. In the process, I was able to discover that there was a secondary operation, to kidnap Shandra.

Being that I had told Ford about the potential threats to his daughter, my first thoughts sketched him to be the one that made the order. But after bashing his head through a few walls, he finally revealed a traitor was amongst the higher ranks. A sabotage mission was in progress and no one knew who or what was in on it. Not only were Heaven and Hell dealing with mysterious disappearances, the Suits were also dealing with missing agents. The only conclusion anyone could think of was that an army was coming together.

The military itself was preparing for an invasion as part of a global joint effort. Satellite feeds pointing towards the heavens and lands helped trace isolated incidents all across the globe. Indigenous tribes in several isolated areas around the world were some of the first to make contact with the scout waves. Unfortunately... many of them met with extinction by unusual circumstances. Government scientists went to each spot to find alien bacteria and viruses spreading everywhere, some of which had flesh eating qualities. Other landing zones, where death didn't follow, unusual markings were left behind. Some of which closely resembled ancient tribal texts.

Extremely high radiation readings also made the sites extremely difficult for the scientists to work in. The energy levels were in such a concentrated zone that it was able to break through their protective suits. Even though the levels that broke through were similar to radiation of a hot summer's day, the fact someting leaked through was a safety concern. Radiation poisoning, cancer, and mutated creatures would giveaway that something was going on and make it impossible to avoid confrontations with idiots jumping to doomsday scenarios. But to my knowledge nothing came into fruition, however that doesn't escape the idea those aware of what was coming were simply too distracted to notice.

As things continue to build on, hiding the truth quickly became harder and harder to do as the extraterrestrial forces began moving to more populated areas. They appeared to use ancient monuments to send messages that no one in the general population was able to decipher. Even with extraterrestrial ties, the Suits were only able to piece together three general messages.

“WE ARE HERE...”

“WE ARE TAKING OVER...”

“WE ARE YOUR RULERS NOW.”

Yeah... war was coming. But who were the new rulers? On a stormy night in July, some answers about what was to come came crashing down in streaks of lightning.

Radiation readings revealed an unusual spike around an old air force base about 15 miles from Murtaugh. This time, the radiation triggered a lightning storm that was unusually strong for the area. The strikes actually struck four to five times in the same spot within a matter of seconds. The lack of

randomness in how the lightning maneuvered almost made it look like something was directing it to attack someone.

By Ford's order, and my own personal curiosity, I used the weapon given to me by Ashtar to mold my grandparent's old motorcycle into a weaponized flying machine to investigate. The weapon, often dubbed the Ashtarian, was capable of fusing itself to other machines to improve their performance. To be honest, it was just cool to ride a silver motorcycle from outer space through the sky. But that was beside the point.

As I rode through the skies, I got a closer look at what was happening. Inside the clouds, a dark humanoid shadow would appear during every strike. As I approached the shape, I was able to make out more details about the shadow. It was male, very tall and very large in stature. Some of the details looked rather unusual for it to be a typical person. There were metallic glimmers coming off the body, whatever was there had armor on. Inside the shadow's hands was a strange object that emitted blue balls of light. The balls of light quickly changed into blue streaks of lightning. This entity was utilizing a direct energy weapon, and under these circumstances, I was dealing with one thing only, a God!

This deity was pissed off, and killing soldiers. Alarms were sounding off as I landed in the middle of the base. Soldiers tried to confront me as I was getting off the Ashtarian motorcycle and shifted it into a rifle form, but lightning soon burned them to death.

One soldier was crouched underneath a large chunk of a hanger wall that was broken off of a building just moments before. I hurried over to see if he was alright. Other than a few bruises and scrapes, he was going to be okay physically. Mentally, however, the poor guy wasn't ever going to recover. In his hands, there was a blood-covered picture of two young ladies. One of them was his wife, the other was his teenage daughter. People he thought he would never get to see again.

It was hard to get his attention, but eventually, I was able to get him to spill what he knew about what was happening. He told me there was a project going on underground that he was aware some other parties were interested in, parties willing to sabotage the progress. He was expecting a rogue espionage mission, but not lightning attacks.

He went on to describe the project that drew the deity’s attention. An energy nexus, a manifestation of the Earth's magnetic field that controls the actions of the general population, was located about 3 miles underneath the base of the nearby mountains and was brought into the base in order to weaponize it. The basic plan was to use it to generate chaos in targeted regions, but there were issues with the designs. The scientists on the job had a hard time getting the nexus to stabilize so it was easier to manage. During the final stages, when they were getting closer, that was when the lightning attacked.

He described to me exactly what he noticed about the attacker. The soldier described the exact figure I noticed on my flight to base. One detail he mentioned, told me everything I needed to know in order to piece together the

identity of the attacker... the Norse god of war Thor.

Before every launch of lightning bolts, a goat-like sound would ring out. The god, Thor, was said to have ridden around in a goat drawn carriage, which allowed him to take to the skies. Knowing the identity of the attacker, I knew that the battle would be rough. Norse gods were war crazed nut jobs that wouldn't stop fighting even when their limbs were chopped off and still bleeding. As I aimed the Ashtarian rifle towards the shadow in the sky, I readied for a long hard battle.

The energy shot I fired hit the target, and several explosions followed as Thor crashed down. I couldn't see where he landed, but that was soon revealed as he launched a lightning bolt straight into my chest. That strike should have killed me, but part of the Ashtarian broke itself off and modeled itself into armor that absorbed every bit of it. Being that I didn't die, Thor was even angrier. It was on.

He used his chariot drawn by two goat-like creatures with metallic wings, each named Tanngrisnir and Tanngnjóstr, to charge me. I used to the Ashtarian rifle to continue to shoot his chariot to level the fight. As the ropes holding the goats in place broke off, Thor's hammer Mjolnir slammed against my chest. I flew backward, as the ground slowly tried to bury me as my body made contact with the world. It felt as if I was hit so hard I was getting shorter.

I retaliated by shifting the Ashtarian into a shape similar to Mjolnir and started bashing into Thor's arm every chance I got. Because I couldn't picture the inner workings of his hammer, I needed to get Thor to let it go just long enough for me to mold the Ashtarian around it. The Ashtarian itself had its own memory system and its own emergency response system. Both helped craft an effective defense against many attackers, especially Thor. Every attack he tried that I wasn't able to spot of time, the Ashtarian blocked.

After fighting for almost an hour, I was finally able to get Thor to drop Mjolnir and let the Ashtarian fuse itself to it. Parts of my weapon quickly formed gauntlets around my arms and a belt around my waist. Mythology stated that Thor was only able to pick up his hammer by using “magical” gloves and a belt. As soon as the Ashtarian finished its formation, I felt several tiny needles break through my skin and my entire body started to tense up. The gauntlets and belt weren't magical at all, they were mechanical acupuncture devices that emitted enough of an electric pulse to enhance muscle strength and adrenaline flow.

The effects of the needles sank into my system almost immediately. I felt the drive and the urge to fight overcome my entire body nearly tenfold of anything else I have ever felt. The pain of seeing Shandra hurt during our time together, seeing Jessica amongst a pile of bloody bodies, every pain I knew that I had either witnessed or felt from the people I helped amplified and molded together into one ultimate power. By using that power, I threw Mjolnir right at Thor's head and sent him flying. He was angry and launched one last attack. I countered with the Ashtarian, which emitted the same levels of energy as

Mjolnir. Both of our weapons made contact, causing one last explosion which leveled the entire base. The Ashtarian, for some odd reason, coated both Thor and I both in a protective metal layer that allowed us to both still be standing even though we were the epicenter of the blast.

Thor saw that my weapon tried to save him, causing him to come to the conclusion I could actually serve as an ally for the war. Once he realized how I came across my own weapon, he came forward about what he was doing. Even though he didn't speak English (in fact his language sounded very close to German) I could understand him on a psychic level. He knew they were trying to mess with a power that could potentially kill millions, so he decided to kill them first and then take the energy nexus.

I informed him even if he were to kill them all, somebody would still go in to take over. As far as finding out where the energy nexus was located, our best bet was to leave the base like we tired ourselves out. Thor agreed and summoned his goat chariot and took to the skies in a blinding flash of white light while I took to the skies myself on my Ashtarian in motorcycle form and flew back to my grandparent's house.

Shandra was standing on the back deck waiting for me. We were both staying the night in Murtaugh because of road construction that tore out the road in front of my house, making it impossible to drive in or out. We were able to park out in the graveyard and sneak by to get the things we needed but it was illegal to be at the graveyard after hours if you weren't an employee (or a dead body).

But that didn't matter, even when run by the crackhead city planner, eventually the job was done. Shandra and I had much more important matters to deal with. The following months after the battle with Thor, I noticed heightened Suit activity nearly everywhere we went. Ford had requested a protection order on us to help combat Shandra's potential attackers. The Suits were ordered to keep their distance but stay close enough so we could tell they were around. Shandra never acted like she noticed them, but the way her eyes would zone out in their direction told me otherwise. I personally was relieved seeing them, knowing that somebody was out there trying to protect her in case something happened to me.

But I forgot one thing... even the Suits, Heaven and Hell were dealing with traitors. Anybody could try to kill her. Anyone from the brightest of angels to the cruelest of demons could burst through at any moment.

Then... in late December of the year 2012... I watched as the battle leaked into my life and my town.

Chapter 14
Outcasted By Hell

December 21, 2012... probably one of the days shrouded most in conspiracy theories. It was nearly impossible to go a single day without hearing some whack job ranting and raving about it being the end of the world. Most would try to quote the Mayan Calendar and Nostradamus Prophecy in order to justify their beliefs without ever actually studying them. Thousands upon thousands of kids would write into various government-funded scientific programs about their concerns, many even quoting that they were planning to commit suicide so they wouldn't have to deal with whatever was coming.

Everyone who bothered to even research the subjects tried their best to get the word out that just about every excuse to justify the end of days were false. There were more Mayan Calendars that went on about another five thousand years. Nostradamus prophecy still had another two thousand years worth of predictions. In fact, a little-known bit about Nostradamus is that the he continued writing prophecy until the day before he died, simply because he knew he wouldn't be able to continue on. If the world did end, what point is there is writing about more prophecy? In retrospect though, I have to wonder if somehow the timelines were altered from the ones Nostradamus had been able to foresee. The beings that came from the woodwork, long forgotten or even never known to mankind, certainly had the power to do it.

But that is not the point. Truth is something devastating was coming. Something a very select few knew about before it happened. Some even questioned whether or not those who instinctively knew about the coming war were actually distant descendants of some ancient prophet. I wouldn't deny the possibility and maybe I would have done some research on it if I had the chance. Chaos filled nearly every crevice of the planet as the Pings grew stronger, and there was still no progress on finding out their source. The chaos became too

overwhelming for everyone. Shandra and I were both at school when the fighting finally erupted.

The twentieth was the last day of school before Christmas Break, just before the alleged doomsday. It was a half day, so naturally, everybody was feeling a bit off in preparation for the time off, but that day was unusual. Rather than ranting and raving about their Christmas plans, nearly everyone was trying to start an all out brawl. The children here were obsessed with fighting and the school administration did nothing to put a stop to it. The signals from the Pings fed on this obsession and drove nearly everyone bat shit crazy. Those of us who tried our best to stay out of it, barricaded ourselves in rooms near all the exits while everyone else "partied" in the hallways. The school was trying everything it can to protect their reputation so they didn't lose any more funding by ignoring the issues.

Fucking. Selfish. Idiots. in my honest opinion.

Shandra and I were both sitting back in one of the science classrooms, helping prepare the teacher's pet fish for the long winter. We both tried to stay calm while listening to the fighting that was happening just outside. A series of windows to our left revealed that the brawls were happening on the outside of the school as well. Fresh blood stains painted bruised bodies covered the bottoms of the walls. The violence had become so intense that people were literally throwing each other twenty feet into the air. I tried my best to ignore what was happening, but Shandra felt uneasy.

"What the heck is wrong people?" Shandra asked staring at the wall closest to the exit after someone slammed into it.

"Too many ways to list, to be honest," I answered.

Before Shandra could continue, my phone went off inside my jeans pocket. I took it out and observed the screen to see who was calling.

"Who is it?" Shandra asked.

"It's... Jerry," I told her.

Shandra had a confused look on her face. We both had the same thought in our head, 'Why was he calling?' If he wanted help containing the fighting outside, he was going to need to call in SWAT. The Ashtarian could easily find a way to take them all out, but letting me loose on a crowd of people may not look good. Plus the idiots in the administration would find a way put the blame on me.

Nevertheless, something was going on and the police were calling on me for help. I answered the phone and listened for clues in the background. Shandra tuned her ears on the conversation.

"Hey Jerry, what's going on?" I asked.

"Dakota, can you and Shandra come down to my office? There is something that I need to run by you really quick," he said.

"Yeah, sure. Just give us a few minutes to work through the crowds

outside."

"Actually, I think this might have something to do with the fighting going on."

"How in the Hell is that possible?" Shandra asked in her mind.

"Let's see first," I said.

"I have never seen anything like it, please get here as soon as possible," Jerry whispered, "I also may think it has something to do with Shandra, or rather who is after her."

As Jerry hung up the phone, I tucked my phone back into my pocket and stared into Shandra's eyes. Finally, there was a lead on who or what was trying to kill her.

"What's wrong?" Shandra asked, "I couldn't hear the last bit of the call."

"Jerry thinks he may have a lead on who is after you."

Shandra's eyes grew so wide at the news. I honestly couldn't tell if she was excited to hear that we were closer to catch her attacker before he had a chance to try anything, or if she afraid her death was one step closer. Either way, she deserved to know the truth about what was happening since the attack was focused on her.

"Shouldn't we go then?" Shandra asked.

"Of course," I told her.

We both looked over to our teacher who was half asleep reading the newspaper by his desk, occasionally glancing at the clock on his computer to see how long until the final bell sounded. There was no point in running our leave by him since he would likely not notice. We each set down the fish tank supplies in the cabinets below the tank and quietly stepped out of the room. Two boys trying to place each other in a choke hold met us by the door. I kicked them into a row of lockers across the hall and grabbed Shandra's hand as we ran through the hallways.

Our bodies twisted and turned to avoid getting wrapped up in fights. A fifty-foot walk soon quickly became a hundred mile journey because of how crowded and chaotic the hallways became. We turned the corner to enter the main hallway of the school where the administration offices were located. Jerry was standing outside his office door with his hand on his pistol, ready to fire warning shots. As we got closer to him, he opened the door while drawing out his pistol. We both made one final sprint as he fired three rounds into the ceiling.

"SWAT is going to be in exactly two minutes. If none of you get back into class RIGHT NOW, they will be barging through every entrance in this school and I don't think they will be nice enough to use stun rounds," Jerry shouted once the crowds became quiet.

Once the crowds actually started to follow his orders, Jerry came into his office to greet us.

“Please tell me those were blanks,” I said.

“Don't worry, I wouldn't waste good bullets,” he joked.

“It's not funny dude,” I warned him.

“What's the matter? Aren't blanks just fancy pop-caps?” asked Shandra, “You can't kill anyone using them, right?”

“Only at close range or if something goes wrong with the gun, blanks can be fatal, otherwise you can still hurt someone,” I answered, “But let's get to why we are here.”

“Yes, of course,” Jerry sighed, “Have a seat, you two.”

Shandra and I took a seat in two chairs in front of Jerry's desk, each one with wooden sides and red cushions at the backs and seats. Jerry sat down as well and began messing around on his computer looking for something. Once his hands settled, he turned his computer monitor to face us, revealing a video file.

“What is this?” I asked.

“It is a video message my brother sent me from the base he is stationed at near Cuba. Watch it,” he said.

He pressed the spacebar on the keyboard to play the video. On the screen the image of a man with a strong resemblance to Jerry standing inside a large tent. He was facing directly into the camera with a tired, ragged look on his face, looking as if he had just witnessed something horrible.

“Tracey, I don't have much time so I need you to listen to little brother. I don't think that I am going to make it home, ever. Something came out of the water and is attacking the entire base. It isn't a craft, no soldiers, not some fucked up monster from the depths of Hell, I can't tell what it... you... before...son of...” the man said before the video malfunctioned and stopped playing. As the signal became corrupted, the images of a black mass filled the screen. It was hard telling what it was doing to Jerry's brother, but it was obvious that it was giving off electrical interference in the process to mask its actions.

“Tracey?” Shandra asked.

“It's Jerry's first name. He hates it when people outside of his family call him that so everyone refers to him as, Jerry,” I whispered to her, “So did you bring us here about the black mass that got your brother?”

“Yeah,” he whispered, “Keep watching, I added a little something to the video for you.”

A few seconds later another video started to play, this one showing feeds from several security cameras placed around the school. The time stamp on each video feed displayed, “12/21/2012 07:30.00,” when they started to play.

The time gradually increased as the video sped through each frame, displaying kids slowly walking into school. Shadow figures would appear to merge with whoever showed up in the frame, almost instantly making them grow hostile towards their surroundings. The video soon increased its playback speed, revealing hundreds of shadows possessing unsuspecting kids just to turn them into the violent maniacs from moments earlier. The video stopped when the clock on the time stamp read, “13:23.02,” about ten minutes before Jerry called me.

“Now the cameras here are similar to ones you guys use on your little hunts, correct?” asked Jerry.

Shandra and I both nodded.

“Okay, then, what the hell are those things?” Jerry asked.

“Those shadow figures... they shouldn't be doing that,” Shandra replied, “Right, Dakota?”

Shandra sounded worried when she asked me that question. I couldn't answer her right away because something about the figures looked unusual. They looked more solid than others and simply felt stronger.

“These figures aren't remnants of human souls,” I said, “If they are then they are ancient.”

My Shadow Hunter appeared behind Jerry. He had an intense look plastered on his face. Something about the shadow beings bothered him. He didn't bother speaking about it, just to avoid being as sensed by Jerry and Shandra.

“What do you mean?” Jerry asked.

“They are too dark and too strong to be normal,” I answered, “And it was hard to tell but I am pretty sure these ones purposely avoided certain people.”

“What? Like a 'pure of heart' type of situation?” asked Shandra.

“More like *'outcasted by Hell'* to be honest,” I answered, “Just look.”

I used one hand to turn the computer monitor towards Jerry while using the other to move the mouse closer to me so I could use it. I could have sworn that one of the video frames happened to show five individuals the shadows completely avoided.

I managed to get the video to start playing a few moments before the spot I thought I saw the abnormal behavior in the shadow forces. Once I thought I saw it again, I paused the video and used the mouse cursor to point out the five people I noticed the shadows were ditching.

The first feed I focused on came from the sports lobby/trophy room towards the back of the school where I noticed the shadows avoiding two people.

“Marcus Tyler, terrorized since he was five about his two gay fathers.

Micasia Jones, adopted through an international adoption agency at the age of nine after she watched her parents and her younger brother get gunned down. She was also teased severely due to her accent and phobias of anything that reminded her of her family's killers," I said.

My theory started to form that the shadows were ignoring people who were trying to make the best out of their personal Hell, and were succeeding. Marcus and Micasia fit this profile perfectly and, much like Shandra and I, they eventually became a couple while helping each other conquer their troubles.

In another camera feed, pointed more towards the cafeteria, another gap in the shadows was obvious. I moved the mouse cursor to point out the only person that wasn't driven crazy.

"June Norris has had romantic feelings for other girls since elementary school but didn't open up about them until the seventh grade. Ever since then, other girls and their dumbass boyfriends would try to sexually assault her every chance they got. June eventually snapped, after a few years of torture, and tried to kill the girl that started it all," I announced, "That was until our good friend Jessica managed to convince her otherwise."

June was a sweet girl, always a smile on her face. But it was always easy to tell when another round of torture met her when in a matter of ninety minutes she would go from a laid back person to someone who was filled with hatred and humiliation. The part that was perhaps most frightening is that she would do nothing to vent her frustration, only allowing it to build and consume her. When she finally came forward about what was going on to Shandra, we tried to help put an end to it.

Shandra would try to bring in help from the teachers and even police officers to get something done about it while I would track down the guys that were involved and break their hands. Shandra's biological father would utilize his resources to keep us out of legal trouble, but at the same time, he accidentally helped keep June's attackers out of trouble as well. But perhaps the most disturbing part is that some of the teachers we went to actually advocated the violence. Nothing was able to get a permanent fix on the situation until Jessica and Brianna happened to transfer to this school and were placed in the same gym class where the latest incidents went down.

Soon after the dust seemed to settle; Shandra and I would invite Marcus, Micasia, Jessica, June, Brianna and whatever man of the week she was with at the time to group dates. We all became close friends because we all were going after the same general goal, to simply make a good life for ourselves.

"How do you know all this?" asked Jerry.

"We all became close and gone on a few ghost hunts," Shandra answered, "It tends to bring out the most hidden parts of a person."

I didn't get a chance to finish giving introductions for all of the people the shadows were avoiding, even though the last two didn't need them.

"Don't get too excited. There are still two people the shadows are

ignoring," I said.

"Who?" Shandra asked.

I moved the mouse cursor over to a camera feed that showed the hallway leading to the special arts building of the school. Surrounded but a crowd of violent idiots stood myself and Shandra with one light and one dark figure standing behind us. Between us stood a light blue figure that stood about waist high. Olivia, and my alter egos, were standing by our side in case we needed a supernatural assist.

"It's us," I whispered.

"What the hell is going to happen?" Jerry asked.

"I think I may know," I answered, "Where are Jessica and Brianna?"

"They left for Utah to visit their grandparents during Christmas Break," Shandra answered.

I took a moment to think about what I was going to say. I had a theory about why the individuals residing within the camera feeds were being avoided by the Shadow army, but I needed Jessica and Brianna in order to test the notion. But regardless of the desired circumstances, I had to say something because it would be very likely that some shadows moving on their own were not going to be our only concern.

"The shadows are all avoiding people that were with us, Shandra. Particularly, people that have joined us on our ghost hunts. They are either really afraid of us, or there are other plans for us," I announced to the room.

The room fell quiet. It was no question that things were about to get very messy. But as for how it was all going to happen, or how it all tied to the warnings centered around Shandra, we were still oblivious. Perhaps that is what scared us the most.

In the silence, Shandra happened to catch something in one of the video feeds that I didn't see. She gave me two taps on the shoulder to get my attention and pointed at a feed that revealed the back parking lot. Standing between two rows of cars stood one of the Suits handing something to a student. Jerry quickly turned the monitor back while I slid the mouse back over to him. We needed to get a closer look at who the student was and what he was given.

As Jerry focused on finding a good shot of the student, I set my hand on Shandra's knee. Her head was tucked into her chest and her hair dropped to the ground like black curtains to cover her tears. Somehow she knew. I tried to think of anything that I could do in order to make her feel better.

"Hey, you're going to be okay. I won't let anything happen to you," I whispered.

"I know," she whispered, "I just can't take this. First, my mom is dying of cancer, now someone is trying to kill me. It is just too much to handle."

The fear of what was to come quickly became too much for her to bear.

On top of her mother recently being diagnosed with stage three lung cancer, she herself was facing a very serious threat. There was nothing I could say or do to ease her pain, and I hated every bit of it. I was supposed to be the good boyfriend and be able to help her through anything that came along, yet all I could do was hold her head against my shoulder just to remind her that I was still there. My Light Hunter appeared next to me with an idea in his head that could help her feel better. I immediately heard the idea echo in my own mind and pieced together the best way to put it to Shandra, just so she would be on board.

"Dakota, I am going to need you tonight with that space gun of yours. Lord knows how fucking psychotic this holiday is going to be," Jerry said.

"I need to be with him," Shandra whined, "I need him in case something happens."

"Shandra, we can't have you out with us for this. It is simply too dangerous to even with Dakota's... what did you call it... Asstarian?" Jerry asked with a smile slowly growing on his face.

The tone in his voice was close to, what he always called, his "dorky dad" voice. It was one that often came out to help his daughter feel better whenever she was either sick or simply upset about something. It didn't work all of the time, but when it did he knew that his little girl would be fine. I watched as Shandra's lips grow into a gentle smile, she was going to make it through this.

"Hey," I whispered to her, "I have an idea."

"What is it?" she asked.

"Before I go help Jerry with the chaos tonight, why don't you get some stuff together so you can stay a few nights with your mom."

"What do you mean?" she asked lifting her head.

"Shandra, stage three cancer is borderline the point of no return. In fact, your mom is very lucky the tumor hasn't spread. You should spend this holiday with her. It could very well be her last."

Shandra looked away for a moment and swallowed. Her mother dying was a truth she didn't want to acknowledge, but she accepted as the truth. I tried my best to show her, ever since she first told me about what was happening, that there was a way to help heal cancer with nothing more than simple love (along with a few lifestyle changes). Basically, all Shandra had to do was to keep her mother in a good mood and the chances of her mom beating this would improve. Simply visiting for the holidays and making some peaceful memories, would be enough to at least get Ramona on the right road to recovery.

"You're right, I should spend Christmas with my mom," she nodded, "What about you?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Who are you going to spend Christmas with?"

“To be honest, I am not sure,” I answered, “It hasn't felt much like family ever since my grandpa died.”

“Oh...” Shandra whispered.

“But to be honest,” I interrupted, “I do have something planned just for you Christmas day that your mom has been helping me put together.”

Shandra's face lit up. Something about the “surprise” was actually giving her a reason to look forward to life in itself. In fact, I could have sworn that on some level she was actually ready to give up.

“Really?” she asked.

“Would I lie to you?” I smiled.

There upon her face, in that very moment, grew a sign of hope as the small flickering flame in her eyes burst into a dancing wildfire. Her arms stretched and latched themselves around my body as she flew out of her chair. I used my arms to lock her in place, to simply embrace her new found euphoria. It all seemed almost unreal for how intoxicating the moment became. In fact, I question how real that moment was to this day, wondering if my own mind decided to give me one last pleasing moment...

...Before absolute Hell broke loose.

I looked over to Jerry who sprouted a confused look on his face. Just by reading his eyes, I could tell he was curious about what my surprise to Shandra was (possibly to put something similar together for his wife). I gently lifted the ring finger on my left hand, just to signal what I was doing without Shandra noticing. Thankfully, Jerry realized what I was trying to say as an impressed grin chiseled its way into his skull.

The final school bell of the day sounded off for the day, signaling for the students to hurry home. Jerry stood and walked over to his office door while drawing his weapon. He had a feeling that the chaos from earlier wasn't quite over, so he opened the door to his office and stood there watching the hallways. Red and blue lights leaped through the hallways in almost circular motions.

“Hey, Dakota. Where are you parked?” Jerry asked.

“Down by the little radio station near the front parking lot, next to the road sign,” I answered, “Why?”

“You two may want to walk with me so my colleagues don't harass you.”

I stood up before Shandra and peaked outside the door to see what was going on. Just outside the front doors of the school stood several police and paramedic units waiting.

“How many of them are here?” I asked.

“Just about every single one that is on duty for the city, quite a few county boys as well. Enough to cover every exit to this school, and a few others over at the other school in town because something similar was going down over

there. Surprisingly, nothing happened over at the elementary and middle schools," Jerry answered.

Shandra peaked her head outside the door to see what was going on. "Shouldn't we get out of here, Dakota? I just texted my mom to let her know what is going on and that we would be there at 3:30," Shandra said.

"Yeah, we probably should go," I acknowledged.

"Just stick with me, you two, people are still a bit jumpy about what has happened while you guys were working with me," Jerry said, "Do you guys have all of your stuff?"

"Yeah, I left my purse in Dakota's car," Shandra answered.

I patted down my pockets on my jacket and jeans to check if I had all of my stuff. Cell Phone, check. Keys, check. Wallet, check. Spare pen and pencil, missing but probably would turn up in the washing machine. Shandra and I didn't bother taking our normal school supplies to school that day, simply because we knew that we weren't going to need them.

"Yeah, we're good. Let's get out of here," I said.

"Thank god," Shandra whispered, "I am getting tired of this place."

"You and me both, sweetheart."

Jerry lead Shandra and me outside and past the crime scene tape surrounding the school. The other officers and paramedics were two distracted by wrangling up the bloody and cocky. Just about everyone who wasn't being shipped to the hospital was being handcuffed by police for questioning. Jerry leading us past them kept us off of their radar and let us slide into a much-needed break as we slid into the car and drove off.

"Dakota, how does Jerry know about your gun?" Shandra asked.

"He caught me trying to use it to pry open a few busted in lockers," I answered, "I showed him how it works."

"Are you sure that was a smart idea?" she asked, "It has been almost a year and you are still trying to figure it out."

"Don't worry, Jerry still gets nervous around just about everything we do."

"Which honestly is ironic considering he saw it all from the beginning, pretty much."

"Yeah, some people just can't handle the things we deal with on a day to day basis."

Shandra turned to face the school as we drove away. I could hear her mind focusing its sights on a single image, one that would probably burn into her mind for the rest of her life.

"Can we?" she whispered, "Can we even handle what is coming?"

I honestly was worried that the shadows that corrupted the people in the

hallways were going to be too much for us to handle. Before I tried to answer her question, I tried to plot some sort of counter strike. The plan needed a way to hold back the invading forces. No matter what approach we tried, there was still going to be retaliation. The only thing that could be done is to find a way to channel the waves into areas they could be better managed (at least direct them away from our homes and families).

"Shandra, as long as we are together, we can take on anything that comes our way," I said.

"But how?" she asked, "How are we going to take this on? I'm sorry for freaking out, but Dakota... this isn't anything we have seen before!"

"Team meeting," I answered.

"Huh?"

As my car pulled into the driveway of my home, I whipped out my cell phone and set it up for a group text. In the "To" field, I entered in Shandra, Marcus, Micasia, June, Jessica, and Brianna's names. For the message, I typed in, "EMERGENCY VIDEO CONFERENCE AT 2 THE TEAM MAY BE IN DANGER," before I hit the send button.

"What did you just send?" asked Shandra.

"A warning to everyone," I answered.

Within seconds reply texts started flooding into mine and Shandra's phones, making them sound as if they were malfunctioning. I could almost hear every finger pressing against the phones used to participate in the conversation as I began focusing all of my attention on it. I opened up the text conversation to read what all had been said so far before I met with them all online.

Marcus: Please tell me this has something to do with what happened at school.

June: Okay, might be a couple minutes late because of computer issues though.

Jessica: Guys? WTF is going on?

Micasia: Jessica, there was a lot of fighting at school. Some kids were almost killed!

Brianna: WTF?!?!

Shandra: Dakota thinks that the fights may have been caused by some supernatural forces that completely avoided all of us who were at school today.

Jessica: You guys had fights too?! Brianna and I have been dodging shit all day because of fights breaking out over here as well.

June: Jessica, are you and Brianna okay hun?

Brianna: We're fine. Why did I get the feeling that there was weird ass shit going on?

Marcus: So what is this meeting about?

Micasia: And who exactly is in danger?

Shandra: Dakota thinks we all are...

Jessica: WTH?!?!?!?! o.O

Micasia: WHAT DO YOU MEAN?!

Marcus: Dakota, please tell me you have a plan, bro!

Brianna: We're all going to fucking die!

June: No one is going to die, Brianna! Don't go freaking out!

Jessica: Dakota, please say something!

Micasia: Is this literally the end of the world?

Shandra: Guys, Dakota is trying to get as much information as possible before he tells you everything.

Marcus: You mean Dakota isn't even sure?

June: Not good...

Micasia: Okay, now I am scared.

"Dakota, please hurry with what you are doing! Everybody is a bit restless now," Shandra said.

"Give me a few moments, I am going to give Jerry a quick call. I need to see if he can send us the footage," I told her.

"Alright, but hurry up, we have about ten minutes to go."

"Plenty of time."

I rushed up the stairs and punched out the entryway into the attic. I had an idea that would help keep the Shadow Army at bay, but it required everyone to get their hands dirty. In order to put everything together, I needed something very rare and very powerful. As I hurried up the attic ladder, I grabbed out my phone and dialed Jerry's number. Three rings sounded off on the phone before somebody finally answered.

"Officer Jerome," he said.

"Jerry, it's me," I said, "I don't have much time."

"What'cha need Dakota?"

"Can I get you to email me the video that you showed to me and Shandra? I feel everyone else in the shot should see it."

"I already did. I also added a little something extra about the young man we saw talking with one of the Suits. It isn't looking good. The weapon is standard issue, but the bullets it is loaded with are psychic assassination rounds. Only one target managed to avoid being shot by them."

"Who was it?"

"Who do you think?!"

“You...mean...”

'Son of a bitch,' I thought to myself, *'I was fucking an assassination target!'*

“So, they can't kill me so they manipulate me into doing their dirty work?!” I nearly shouted.

I heard some heavy noise in the background. Some voices mumbled in the background that I had a hard time understanding. I wasn't able to pick out specific words, but whatever was going on sounded important.

“No time to explain. The email should be in your inbox by now, goodbye,” Jerry hurried before he hung up.

“O...kay,” I whispered.

When the call screen on my phone faded into my wallpaper and the clock on my phone showed me that I only had five minutes before the emergency video conference. I needed to grab something that would help keep the Shadows at bay.

“Where is it? Where is it?!” I whispered to myself.

I started sorting through my amulets to find one that was extremely rare and forged for purposes like this. It didn't have an exact name for how rare it was, but it was extremely powerful. It was the amulet gifted to me by my older self on the day my grandfather died, and after some research, I was finally able to find out what it was for. The symbols, other than my logo, were for protection, strength, and sight. The only thing I was able to come up with is that the amulet was to boost senses meant to help with a hunt.

“To fight evil, to protect what you love, to heal, and to see the enemy coming, that is what that amulet is supposed to do,” reminded my Light Hunter.

“Thank you for that,” I joked.

I rushed out of the attic and down the stairs with the amulet in hand to meet up with Shandra, who had the video conference pulled up on the computer. The screen had web camera and microphone built into it that Shandra and I used to talk with the others. Video feeds showing the faces of the other Paranormal Raiders began popping up on the screen, all nearly plastered with worried looks. Four frames appeared on the screen. One showed Jessica taking up more of the frame with Brianna in the background. Another frame showcased Marcus and Micasia huddled together underneath a blanket. A third frame showed June scratching the neck of a tiny kitten that was on her shoulder. The fourth and final frame was a preview window that showed how Shandra and I looked on other computers.

“Can everyone hear me okay?” I asked.

“Hey guys,” Jessica said, “What the hell happened over there?”

“I am hoping that Dakota and Shandra have some answers because I am not sure,” joked Marcus.

"First off, Marcus, I was actually wanting to check in on everyone after the whole ordeal," I said, "But I may have something for you all."

"What is it?" June asked.

"Get ready to screen cap. Everyone is going to need this," I said.

I held up the amulet so the symbols would be facing the camera. June immediately tapped on the screen cap button on her keyboard, she was always the one more interested in occult symbolism. Jessica took a minute to study the amulet while Marcus and Micasia quickly became confused.

"Dakota, what is that amulet called?" Jessica asked.

"It doesn't have a name, it is the only one of its kind in existence," I answered.

"Then how did you get a hold of it?" asked Brianna.

"You don't want to know," I answered.

"Okay, never mind that. What are we supposed to do with a screencap of it?" asked June.

"Hurry up and take the screencap already there isn't much time, I ordered everyone.

Everyone hurried and pressed on their devices to make them take a photo of the amulet. Some struggled with their equipment but eventually, three silent clicks verified that everyone took the photograph. Everyone was confused about my intentions, judging by the way their eyes each scanned the amulet before I finally set it down.

"Okay, Dakota... what do you want us to do with the screen shot?" asked Marcus.

"Trace every detail of the amulet to the best of your abilities up to four times and set up a perimeter around where you all plan to stay tonight by burying the traces," I answered.

"What is going on?" Brianna asked.

"Huh?" Marcus and Micasia asked in unison.

Shandra turned to face me with a confused look on her face. Jessica had a nearly identical look on her face.

"Can you at least tell us what that amulet does?" June asked.

"The symbols on it come from several different cultures. Each one represents protection, strength, will, and sight," I answered, "The massive fighting from earlier was caused by a Shadow Army and for some reason, they decided to avoid us. I personally believe that is because there are other plans for us."

"How can you be sure?" asked Jessica.

"Because I have video footage from school today that shows several

shadow apparitions leaping inside of people, making them go bat shit crazy. But when we show up in the frame, there is a huge gap that surrounds us instead of something trying to make us join in on the fight," I told her, "I know you and Brianna weren't at school today but I have a feeling that we are all in danger. In a few minutes I will be sending you all an email with the video attached, please watch it to the end."

"Okay, bro," Marcus said, "But you are seriously freaking me out."

He glanced over to Micasia for a brief moment but quickly drew himself into a near panicked state when he noticed her eye's nearly crawling out of their sockets. His eyes slowly traced where Micasia was fixated on, and his jaw nearly fell from his skull as they lined up with his screen. June's kitten soon started to scream as he too noticed the disturbing image.

"Dakota... those shadows you... were talking about... what... did they look like?" June asked.

"Umm...why?" I asked.

Shandra pointed towards the frame Jessica and Brianna were showcased in. Jessica was the only one visible since Brianna stayed in the background doing various things while listening in on the conversation. This time, rather than a shot of a living room full of comfy leather chairs and a large flat screen television, a black mist could be seen engulfing the room.

"Jess..." I said.

"Guys, what is going on?" she asked.

"Turn around..." I told her.

Almost without any hint that something was happening, she turned her head instantly. At first, she acted like nothing was going on, but she immediately flipped back around screaming at the top of her lungs. When she jumped, she moved just enough out of frame so the rest of us could see what was happening. Micasia and Shandra soon followed suit, but they muffled themselves by smacking their hands against their mouths. Marcus and I should've tucked them into our arms to block out the horrific sight, but we froze in place.

In the dead center of the mists, Brianna stood with her arms in the air and the palms of her hands facing forward. Her skin was pale and her body shaking. Blood was pouring from her eyes, ears, and mouth. Fresh blood and pieces of skin covered her hands like gloves. The muscles underneath her skin were black and rotten. Her bones from her hands down to the bend of her elbows had scratches running completely down them. I tried to say something, but as the words materialized in my mouth, Brianna's body shakes became stronger. She opened her lips and the screams of eighteen different voices pierced all of our ears and fried the video feed on their computer. Jessica could still be heard screaming while sounds of various objects smashing against each other also pleaded for help. The audio quickly faded out as several voices began taunting Jessica.

Everyone else in the conversation fell dead silent. The full reality of the situation was right in front of us. The Shadow Army was going to kill us, all of us.

"One down, six to go," whispered my Shadow Hunter.

'Where is the Light Hunter?' I telepathically asked him.

'He is trying to help Jessica get out. Brianna is dead and something took over her body. Whatever is inside her is powerful, and a fucking lunatic,' he answered.

'Is that how she clawed opened her own fucking arms?'

'Yep. Just after she ripped out her own eyeball and ate it.'

'Jesus Christ, what in the Hell is going on?'

'Demons have always had a taste for pretty young girls, you know this. But what happened with Brianna... that is something stronger than Satan himself. Something that hasn't been around for a few thousand years.'

'Damn it, what should I do?'

'Send the video to your friends, along with copies of the sketch you did of the amulet. They need to print it off and get the perimeters set in as soon as possible.'

'Will it be enough?'

'For them, it will be enough to keep them safe. As for your girl, she is going to need a little something extra to help her.'

'What is that?'

My Shadow Hunter quickly faded away before answering the question. Under the circumstances, I figured he was trying to help Light Hunter with getting Jessica away from whatever took over Brianna. Maybe I could figure out what he was going to suggest to me in order to protect Shandra, I don't know. All I did know, is that the rest of us shouldn't stand around when we could prevent more deaths. Everyone had tear soaked faces at possibly they were going to be next to die.

"Listen, guys, we need to do everything we can to avoid more of what just happened. I am going to send out the emails, watch them. There will also be a sketch of the amulet also attached so that way you can just print it out and set up the perimeter even quicker. As for Jessica, keep positive thoughts focused on her and she will make it through," I said.

"What about Brianna?" asked June.

My eyes nearly fell from my skull as I tried to deliver the news. Brianna may have been my ex-girlfriend, but she was still an important person in my life. The first person, other than Cherry, to inspire me to break free from my personal Hell, was now the very vessel of something even Hell is frightened of. Her body was too mangled and destroyed for most people to survive. She...

“Brianna is dead,” I said.

Marcus's head dropped when I said it. Micasia looked like she was a few seconds away from puking her guts out. June cringed as the salt from her crying leaked into the wounds left by her frightened kitten. Shandra was frozen still. We all accepted that death was a natural part of life, and we went on our daily lives trying to fill them with as much excitement and success as we could before our time. But we never imagined that it would be taken from us. We knew the horrors of an unexpected death, through car accidents to suicides, but a new type of fear emerged from knowing that it was a simple outcome. Be it cancer, or the death of a loved one in the military, we knew the hurt all too well. But in that moment, an even greater fear overcame us. The suspense that we were being picked off like flies made things all too real.

“I love you all,” whispered Shandra.

“Love you too,” everyone else whispered in unison.

I know it sounds like a horror movie cliché, but it is the truth. Before we all cut off the video conference, we said what very well could be the last goodbye we ever said to each other. It felt horrible knowing that Jessica and Brianna didn't get a chance to embrace it. We were all friends united by tragedy, by a common path that formed when our worlds met, which immediately made us all family. Now we were being hunted as one.

“Shandra,” I whispered, “Are you okay?”

She shook her head as her lips began to quiver with salty tears slowly coating them in diamond mirrors. There was no need for her to speak, I knew everything she was going to say. Her mind focused on the possibility her death was next, perhaps more frightening was how she was going to die. Only one thing could help ease her mind, something that Jessica and Brianna had a hand at arranging.

“Listen, there is something I want to show you,” I whispered.

“What Dakota?” she growled, “What is so fucking important?”

“There is something that Jessica and Brianna wanted me to give you,” I said, “I think it will help you feel better.”

“What?”

I stood up and took her hand to lead her up the stairs. Her palms felt weak and fragile as we took each step, eventually leading ourselves into our bedroom. I picked up her hand and gave it a gentle kiss before letting it drop to her side. The look in her eyes showed me that she was confused about what I was doing, something I hoped would happen.

“Please, close your eyes,” I told her.

She took both of her hands to cover her face. I could hear her mumble under her breath the words, “What is he doing?” I didn't say anything while her eyes were covered and tried my best to keep every part of my body silent while I moved through the room. As I walked over to my closet, a gentle breeze opened

up the door just enough for me to grab the tiny black box sitting on the top shelf that held Shandra's gift inside. My fingers shivered as they wrapped themselves in the smooth fabric that encased the box. They knew how important this moment was, and shook at the suspense of what could happen. I took my open hand and used it to close the closet while the box pressed itself against my chest. My heart whispered a little prayer into the box to bless it with love and protection. I slowly walked back over to Shandra and got down on one knee.

"Shandra," I whispered, "Will you marry me?"

Her hands slowly fell from her face. Her jaw dropped as the fabric of box came into view. I cracked open the box to reveal a circular cut, four karat diamond engagement ring with a silver band engraved with the words, "Your Wings Carry Me to Serenity," on the outer band. More tears sprang from her eyes, ones that actually sparkled with delight. Her mind became overwhelmed with emotions, she wasn't sure what to think or say.

"Da...kota... I don't know what to say," she whispered.

"Just say what is in your heart," I told her.

I tried to tune into her mind to see where her words might lead her, but everything was a blank. Her mind couldn't come up with anything to say.

"I had help from Brianna, Jessica, and your mother to make sure it was perfect," I told her, "I was planning to on giving it to you Christmas day but I figured under the circumstances they would want to make sure I gave it to you before it was too late."

Two strange blue lights appeared on both sides of the ring box. They slowly grew into two separate hands, one bigger than the other. Shandra and I watched as they both rested on the top of the ring. The diamond welcomed their presence as if they were two angels who came to bless the ring. As the diamond reflected the lights from the angel hands, the identities of the two visitors became known. One was our beautiful daughter, Olivia, with a bright smile on her face accompanied by her sparkling blue eyes. The other was Brianna with a look on her face that I had never seen before, a look of serenity.

"You two, have a very beautiful daughter," Brianna said.

"Thank you, Aunty Bri," Olivia cheered.

"Brianna," Shandra whispered, "What happened to you?"

"I have made some very horrible mistakes," she answered, "But I am finding a way to make up for them and I thought that Olivia could help me do it since we don't have much time."

Olivia excitedly shook her head in agreement. Whatever she and Brianna had planned to do was obviously very special to her. The light from the diamond grew brighter as they whispered a chant of sorts under their breaths. The room quickly felt lighter, as if we had entered the heavens and soared through the skies. Shandra and I couldn't help but feel at peace and free. As the lights continued, another voice appeared one that I always tried to listen for.

“You've done a good job, DT,” said my grandfather.

“Thanks, grandpa,” I whispered.

As soon as I thanked my grandfather, the lights from the diamond grew so bright it had blinded Shandra and I. Once the shine faded out, and in the time it took for our eyes to adjust, the spirits that came to see our engagement was gone. I guess they really didn't have much time to visit. I smiled as I looked towards Shandra, still in shock from the whole ordeal, just to see what her next move was going to be. In a matter of moments, my questions were answered as Shandra nearly tackled me while shaking her head up and down.

“Yes, yes I will marry you!” she cried out.

I shut the ring box as I wrapped my arms around her and lifted her up. As she lifted legs and moved her lips onto mine, I felt our hearts beating against each other. She deserved this and so much more that I wasn't able to give her. But that night, I slowly tried everything I could think of ways to bring what she deserved to live.

“Thank you, for everything,” Shandra whispered.

“As long as our hearts sing to the same tune, I will always find a way to travel through any world to make you happy,” I whispered back.

As she planted a final kiss on my lips, she dropped from my body and reached for the ring box. She took it from my fingers and slowly opened the box up so she could get an even closer at her ring. Something about the look in her eye told me that she felt as if she was in a dream-like state. She didn't believe anything that was happening. One moment she goes from mourning the very tragic death of her closest friends, and the next she was engaged to the person who protected her the most.

To help her realize that the last few moments were, in fact, a reality, I took the ring and gently slid it onto her finger. Her whole hand quivered with excitement as the ring settled on her skin.

“How does it feel?” I asked her.

“It feels good,” she answered.

“Good,” I said, “Now you should probably get ready. I am sure your mom will want to see how the ring looks on you.”

“You're right. Thank you. I just wish Jessica could see it.”

I leaned in and gave her a kiss on the cheek and whispered, “Don't worry she will. We will make it through this.”

“How do you know? How can anyone know?”

“I know because I can see the future, remember?”

“And what do you see?”

I walked towards the doorway of my bedroom of turned my head to face her. There was a future I saw with her.

"I saw you, me, and Olivia under the brightest of stars I have ever seen," I answered.

"That's beautiful," she whispered.

I nodded my head and slowly walked down the stairs. One final thought popped up about the future I saw with me and Shandra in it.

"While our bodies are bloody and burning," I whispered under my breath.

As I hurried down the stairs to focus on the email, I could hear Shandra packing her things. Our dresser drawers slowly opened and closed as she carefully placed her stuff into her bags. I couldn't help but wonder if she was worried about breaking the ring. It didn't really matter, I trusted that she would take care of the ring.

While I listened to Shandra mumble under her breath about her plans for her holiday with her mom, I prepared the email for the others so they would be prepared. I don't know why Brianna was the first one to die, maybe what was in the email would help prevent any more casualties. There was no way I could tell that sending out that email actually did any good. I just had to trust that somehow, in SOME way, it did some good.

In the message, I simply let my heart take over just so I could put together something meaningful. If more people I cared about were going to die, it was best that we all ended things on a good note. But for some reason, I felt as if the email should be written to a much wider audience

"To All,

"If you are able to read this then you are probably aware of the chaos that emerged on December 21st of the year 2012. Whatever is the reason you see this message is not important, but what you do with the remaining time in your life is. There will come a time in each and every one of our lives where we will leave the limitations of our physical bodies to rejoin the great fabric of the cosmos. In the coming days, many of whom were originally meant to live on will have the chance to leave this life and move on to the next, be it by their own choice or by the hands of another. Many have lived their lives wondering if they would be remembered or missed if they ever suddenly disappeared. Many are met with the false answer that they will be forgotten, that they will not be missed, but this is not true. The cosmos will remember, for it has no sense of age. The spirits we see roaming the night ARE those the cosmos chose to remember, and since we are a part of the cosmos, the spirits are ones we chose to remember. We will all is seen the chance to live on, either by fighting in our physical bodies or as spirits who watch over their loved ones.

"That is why... over the span of what remains of our lives I believe it is best for everyone to do the following things.

1. Love those close to you more, they may not be around when this is over

2. Forget the conflicts that have corrupted your life, there will be new battles much greater than those

3. Teach others the skills and knowledge you have learned in your lifetime, for the new generations that will come into the picture

4. When you have the time, use your knowledge and your memories to write your story. Leave a lasting marker about your struggles and how you survived the coming battle. Our names may soon be etched into tombstones, but if we leave something permanent for the future generations as a warning for when history tries to repeat itself.

"Follow these guidelines and we'll have time to restart the new world if enough of humanity survives. I do hope to meet you all in the New World.

"To the other Paranormal Raiders,

"I am thankful for all of you. Every single one of you has brought your own joys into my life as we became The Ones Who Walk All Worlds, and now our ties to each other and all we accomplished are going to be tested. I know not to what extent or what these tests will entail, but I do know it will be too much to handle. Stay close to one another and only trust those willing to press their backs against yours.

"Attached is a video and a few documents that will help you make it through the coming fight. By the way, to get a start on the New World, below are some special messages for all of you.

"Shandra: Thank you for everything. For the joy, for the friendship, for your love, for the memories, and for the future that is unfolding before us. I am forever grateful for everything we shared these last few years, and I hope for many more years. I am also glad to soon call you my wife.

"Jessica: After seeing what happened with Brianna, I hope you are able to see this. You have been one of my closest friends and I cannot thank you enough for the times you helped me. You always have been intelligent and not afraid to pursue whatever it is you wanted.

"June: I know that we haven't known each other for a long time. But I am glad we have become friends. I do hope that you and Jessica make it together. You two seem to make each other very happy and hope it all works out.

"Micasia: I have always loved how you weren't afraid to stand out. You were always the type to try out whatever popped into your head and actually was good. I always admired that about you, and the fact you were brave enough to take on Marcus.

"Marcus: I am glad to have known you for these many years. What was grade was it when we met? 6th grade, right? No matter how long we have known each other, I have come to know you as a brother. And I would like to ask you to be my best man.

"Good luck to you all.

“Dakota”

I attached the video and photos of the amulet to the email before sending it. This email was the only way to guide anyone to right paths of survival. I wasn't going to start marching through the streets shouting random bull shit. I wasn't going to start a picket line. None of that. The only thing I could leave some sort of instructions IF any of us survived. The most important step I felt was necessary to follow was the fourth one in the message. Everyone, who is able, needs to find some method to document everything that happens to them when the battle begins. Too much chaos would emerge for anyone to keep an accurate written description of events without dealing with interruptions that could very well end their life, as I have faced while putting this book together. But truth is, the things I have seen alone are probably burned so deeply into my mind that I would still remember it all in precise detail if I ever faced a condition such as Alzheimer’s.

As Shandra came down the stairs, I sent the email to the remaining members of my team. I heard a hitch pitched ring tone come from the stairs, which made Shandra stop half way down the stairs. Her phone quickly got the email, with very little delay, and it was obvious that she took the time to read it.

“What you said is amazing, Dakota,” Shandra said.

“You know I mean every part of it,” I told her.

She came down the stairs to face me with a luggage bag in hand. Her eyes were filled with so many emotions about the coming days, most are filled with fear. I walked up to her to wrap my arms around her body. She dropped her bag and locked her arms around me.

“I'm scared,” she whispered.

“I know. I am too,” I told her.

“Then how can you be sure we will make it?”

“Shandra, fear is nothing more than a barrier the mind dares you to overcome. There are only three options you are given; to climb over, to work around, or to break through. There are no ridges to grasp and the fight will come from the sky so there no point to fly. The fight will spread to everywhere around the world, so it will be impossible to dance around. Our only option is to break through it.”

'But how?' she whispered in her mind.

'We will find a way when it comes,' I told her.

Shandra's arms slowly slid down my body and dropped to her sides. I gave her one last squeeze before letting her go and grabbed her bags. Everything I needed for the day was in my pockets. As for my weapon, I could make it appear from mid-air at any moment.

“Should we get out of here?” I asked.

“Yeah, I want my mom to see the ring!” she joked.

“I'm glad, it looks good on you.”

I lead Shandra out to the car and gently placed her bags in the back seat as she got in on the passenger side. I wouldn't have a problem with her driving, but so much was on her mind she wouldn't be able to focus on the reckless drivers that tend to come out during the winter months. But to be honest, not even cars with sensors so strong they can map the movements of electrons could be prepared.

As we drove away, I could sense that Shandra was still unsettled about what was next for us. Her hands constantly shifted. Her mouth kept opening and closing like she was trying to say something, but the words couldn't match her lips.

“So, what is it that you and Jerry are going to do?” she asked.

“Mostly just keep an eye on things around town,” I answered, “Why do you ask?”

“No reason. I was just wondering because you two usually don't get together unless something has already happened.”

“You're right,” I chuckled, “That does seem to be the pattern.”

“I know, so what is going on?”

“Just some patrol work, robberies tend to increase this time of year. Normally there are simply bank robberies and lowlifes who jack toy drives and people's Christmas presents. But the supernatural boost driving the latest bit of insanity may inspire more than punks taking advantage of weak moments. So they are wanting me to come in so I could spot potential targets.”

“How are you going to do that?”

“It won't be hard to spot any patterns, but for security reasons, I cannot go into any specifics about how it will all work.”

“So you're saying that you, yourself, aren't sure of how it is all going to work out?”

I took a deep breath, she caught me. “The truth is so much is in the wind right now no one knows,” I told her.

“Figures. So what if something happens?”

The tone in Shandra's voice was different. Rather than a worried soul trying to piece together a broken future, she sounded like someone prying for information. I know it sounds weird, but she almost sounded like she was in a criminal investigation show as a character wearing a wire in order to unravel the schemes of some master criminal.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yeah, why?” she asked rather confused.

“No reason, you just seem awfully talkative.”

“I know, I am just trying to get my mind off of what happened with

Brianna. I'm sorry."

I laid my hand on her knee to get her attention. Her mind was splitting in so many ways it would end up creating two completely different personalities if it hadn't happened already.

"Don't be. We both lost a friend, but at least we know she is in a better place," I said.

Shandra simply nodded her head. As her head moved forward, I tried to keep an eye open for any strange markings on her neck. Particularly anything that would resemble anything I had planted in my neck for the Ferri job. Heck, maybe it was still in my neck for all I knew. Seeing that nothing was on her neck that I was able to spot, I simply took a deep breath and continued driving.

Text message tones started to sound off on both cell phones in the car. Shandra quickly reached for her phone and nearly ripped through her messages, trying to find one from Jessica.

"Any from her?" I asked.

"No, just from the others," she answered.

"Damn it, that means she is still fighting."

"How long do you think she can make it?"

"Jessica is very smart, she will find a way. Something tells me that she is trying to find a way back here to see us."

Shandra stares at me confused. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"This is home to her, despite all of the hell she had seen. It is where her family is, the people that would do everything in their power to keep her safe."

"It's where we obviously build our family."

Olivia appeared in the backseat, kicking her legs back and forth as if she was in her own world. Somehow, seeing her like that was relaxing. Olivia was the light at the end of the tunnel and the trumpet sounding off the end of the war.

"We're here," she whispered before fading away.

"I guess someone is already plotting visits to Grandma's house," I joked.

"She is going to be a little terrorist when she gets old enough," Shandra laughed.

"To be honest, I can't wait to actually hold her."

A gentle smile grew on Shandra's face. She would always tell me about how worried the guy she would end up being with was going to be the same monster as her step father. I'd guess her hearing what I had to say about Olivia was enough confirmation for her to realize the exact opposite was happening.

"Well, we should probably go in. Mom is wanting to see you before

you go out with Jerry," Shandra said.

"Okay, that's probably a good idea," I said, "I could probably get a better look at how she is doing."

"The doctor said the tumor is shrinking and haven't found any more, so hopefully you won't see anything else."

Shandra and I were referencing the time I accidentally used my psychic abilities to spot the very tumor which snapped my grandfather's spine when he died. Ever since she found out her mother had cancer, she tried persuading me to keep an eye on the situation through the same methods. Originally she was hesitant, feeling that because of my grandfather I wouldn't do it. Eventually, she convinced me to monitor her mother's condition, just in case I could spot something the doctors couldn't. Needless to say, the doctors and I both reached the same conclusion. Shandra's mom, Ramona, was getting better. She had lost a lot of weight but somehow kept herself from becoming a skeleton. It was quite impressive.

As Shandra and I got out of the car, Ramona stepped outside the house to greet us. She was holding a large plate full of fresh brownies. The house she was living in wasn't the same one as when I first came to Shandra's rescue. The first house was too damaged from a termite infestation to be saved, forcing her to move to another house. Thankfully her landlord had just opened a two bedroom, single story house just down the block and offered to let her live there for reduced monthly rent payment. Even though it wasn't far, it seemed to be enough to help Ramona move on from her abusive ex-husband.

"Come on, you two," she yelled, "These are still hot."

"Mom, you have to see the ring Dakota got for me!" Shandra shouted.

Shandra hurried up to her mother to greet her with a large hug before showing off the ring. I went to the back seat and grabbed Shandra's bags before I greeted my soon to be mother-in-law. As I shut the doors to my car and started walking towards the front door of the house, the smell of the brownies greeted my nose with a rich, chocolate welcome.

"Those smell delicious, Ramona," I laughed.

"Come on in and have a few then, Dakota!"

I couldn't help but giggle at the enthusiasm she showed. Again, it was very impressive for her to be like that in the condition she was in, somewhat admirable as well. As I walked inside the house, I could feel the warmth of love and brownies counter the winter cold. The thought of my future wife and mother-in-law in the same building and everybody simply being happy was a sign of hope for a future.

I hurried into Shandra's room and placed her bags on her bed before I joined Shandra and Ramona in the living room for some delicious brownies. The two sat together on an old green couch in the living room while chatting about romance and just about any other subject that came to mind as I took a seat on a

nearby recliner. We all faced a wooden coffee table where the brownies laid. I grabbed a brownie from the top of the pile and took my first bite.

"So Dakota, what is the plan for you and Shandra?" Ramona asked.

"Mom!" Shandra squealed.

"What? I would like to know when the wedding is!"

"I told you that we didn't have a chance to discuss any details."

"Is it because of what happened to Brianna?"

"Well, yes," I answered.

"Oh, okay. I figured that because of the drugs she was using she would start acting weird. But not like what Shandra told me," Ramona said.

My face froze. I didn't know about Brianna using any sort of drugs. In most cases, any sort of paranormal "events" stirred up the phenomena would be traced to a drug-induced hallucination. Yet little do most people know, in very rare cases, actual demons come out to play with drug addicts simply because they know their presence would be excused. If the drugs were anything serious, it could have been why Brianna was the first to die.

"What drugs?" I asked nearly clenching my fists.

"Just some sleeping pills," Shandra answered, 'And heavy doses of refined meth.'

'WHAT?! Why didn't you tell me?!'

'Cause I know you would freak out, and Brianna made Jessica and I swear not to tell you while she was trying to get better.'

'She was trying to get better? Shandra, those drugs could be why Brianna was the first to die!'

'I'm sorry! She was getting better, I swear!'

My phone rang with Jerry's name flashing on the screen.

"I'd better answer this," I said, "It could be about tonight."

"What's going on?" Ramona asked.

"Dakota is helping some cops with the holiday crazies," Shandra answered.

I rose from my seat and took a step outside to handle the phone call. Being that it was police business, even though I wasn't an official cop, it was protocol to keep things within a loop. The people on the outside needed to stay out unless it was one of their loved ones involved. Even in those circumstances, there is only so much that can be said.

"Hey, what's up?" I said.

"I need you out earlier, the nut jobs are already out and about," Jerry said, "We've already had three domestics and seven break-ins."

“Jesus Christ, what the hell is wrong with people?”

“Hey, if there weren't psychos and stupid people, a majority of the world would be out of a job.”

“Too true. Anyway let me finish up with Shandra and I'll be out and about.”

“Hurry up. There isn't much time.”

Jerry hung up the phone right as some loud bangs and cracks started to grow in the background. He was getting his own slice of hell being that he was one of the few actually standing in the way of an all out brawl. Right as I was tucking away my cell phone, Shandra came outside to join me.

“Hey, can we talk?” she asked.

“Sure, what's up?” I asked her.

“Are you mad? About Brianna?”

“No, I'm not mad Shandra. There is nothing that can be done about it now.”

“Then why do you keep acting like that?”

“I'm sorry! Shandra, Brianna is dead because of those drugs. If I knew about it, I could have done something to save her!”

“Don't yell at me! Don't you think I feel bad enough already! Brianna scratched so deep into her skin that you could see her bones! She is dead because of me!”

Shandra burst into tears. Her face and eyes burst into an array of shiny reds. She buried her face into her palms as her tears flowed through the folds of her skin. Her gasps for air nearly sounded like she was drowning. She knew I hated to see her like that, so I immediately wrapped my arms around her. I couldn't let us break out into a fight like what happened when Jessica was taken.

“You're wrong,” I whispered, “You're not the reason she is dead. She made the choice to use the drugs.”

“No, I'm the reason. I am the one that introduced her to the guy that got her hooked. She started about a week after Jessica disappeared. At first, she just said it was pure weed, something to help with her eating disorder and the high blood pressure. Then one day Jess caught her snorting something that looked like black crystals. We figured that it was some sort of meth.”

“Shandra, listen to me.”

Her cries settled so she could hear me clearly. Her pulse radiated through her body.

“Brianna made the choice, and now she paid the price. What happened, you had nothing to do with.”

'How can you be sure?' she mentally asked.

'Because I know you. I know, that you aren't capable of hurting anyone unless you absolutely had to,' I answered, 'Now please, be strong for me tonight. When this is over... I honestly can't tell who will be left.'

Shandra lifted her head so her eyes would meet mine. She finally realized that I was just as scared as she was, yet I was still willing to fight.

“Then why are you willing to fight?” she asked me.

“For this,” I whispered.

I leaned into her to grab one last kiss for the evening before I went off to war. She needed this as a reminder of why I was doing this, why I did anything to make our lives better. I did it all... for her. Not to become some war hero. Not to have my name engraved on a stone monument. Not to have a statue of my likeness erect in the town I called home. But to protect her. To ensure that she would have a good life, one where none of her demons would be able to taunt her. One where the demons of any of our loved ones would no longer. Jessica, June, Shandra, Micasia, Marcus, Me, Brianna and even Olivia would all be free. Was that too much of a dream to accomplish? To simply help the ones I've come to know as family lead good lives.

As Shandra's lips pulled away from mine, I readied myself for the one last breath of commitment to the night's activities.

“I'll call you when I am done tonight,” I told her.

“Okay,” she whispered, “Is this just for tonight?”

“For now. Everyone is thinking that it will tone down after tonight.”

“Okay. I love you.”

“Love you too. Please call me if anything happens.”

“Okay.”

Through one of the windows, near the front door, I waved inside to Ramona as I started to walk away. She waved back as her daughter stood by the door to watch as I drove away. As I started the engine in my car, she blew a kiss towards me just before she walked into the house.

When the tires met the road as I drove away, I pulled out my phone to send Jerry a text message to let him know that I was finally on my way.

Me: I just finished with Shandra.

Jerry: Good. Meet with me in the parking lot at the bar, across the street from the old dollar store.

Me: I thought that we were meeting downtown, near the old fountain?

Jerry: Downtown has been compromised. National Guard is containing some rioters in that area.

Me: When in the HELL was the National Guard called in?

Jerry: All military units still stationed here in the states were put on

standby thanks to Ford.

Me: Should we be meaning him over text messages?

Jerry: Hell is breaking free as we speak, Dakota. The last thing people are worried about is who is running the only lines of defense. People are already thinking that martial law was declared.

Me: Has it?

Jerry: Not yet officially.

Me: So what happens if when it is declared?

Jerry: That will probably be better answered when you get your ass over here

Me: Got it. I'll be there in ten minutes.

Jerry: Make it five.

My Shadow and Light Hunters appeared in the backseat right as Jerry's last text came through. I glanced at them both through the rear-view mirror.

"About time you two showed up," I said.

"We told Ford that you would likely need some backup for this run," grunted Shadow.

"So do you need us to do anything?" asked Light.

"Stall all vehicles, except for police and military. But focus more on ones that look like they are causing trouble, just so we can give our friends in uniform a hand with any troublemakers. I need to meet with Jerry before we hunt tonight," I ordered.

Without question, they both flew out of the roof of my car and began shooting lightning towards specific targets. The bolts, each in the sources respected color, acted like electromagnetic pulses in order to fry the wiring inside of the vehicles. If the people inside the vehicle contributed to the mess, their car wouldn't work to help the police catch them. If the people on the inside were running for help or shelter, they were left alone by my Hunters. Too many innocent people were already harmed or killed in the confusion. As I continued to drive through the streets, I turned on the radio to listen just to get a better idea of how widespread the insanity was becoming.

In San Francisco, at least four hundred were estimated to have leaped to their deaths off of the Golden Gate Bridge. Chicago was reporting countless fires caused by arsonists. Several parts of Manhattan were quarantined off by military officials due to extreme rioting. In Denver, several children were caught in the crossfire of their parents fending off home invaders. Several inmates were breaking free from prisons all over the country, some even making it out of the highly secured facilities. In Alaska, several mothers killed their youngest children and threw the bodies in nearly frozen rivers to "preserve their innocence." Many agencies within Texas were reporting parents slicing open their own throats in front of their own children, expecting them to do the same.

Those were just the reports I did hear, before one announcer finally came across with the words, “President Slade will now be making an announcement on behalf of all military and law enforcement agencies across the nation, in response to the recent violence that has swept every city in America. We now go live to the President's bunker in Washington.”

It felt as if the entire world grew silent as the sound of the radio shifted over to the President before he would make his announcement. I couldn't hear the breaking windows or the screaming children that were laying on the sidewalks as I drove around. A man on the radio took a deep breath before speaking. My mind grew heavy as it recorded every word and burned it all into its deepest portions.

“My Fellow Americans,

“Within the last few hours, violence unlike anything ever seen before has corrupted the fabric of this great nation. In fact, as I am making this address, I am receiving reports that every nation is reporting great violence and bloodshed amongst their people. It is because of these recent events that I, President Author S. Slade alongside many other national leaders, are declaring a state of martial law effective immediately. Here in the United States, our military has prepared for such a widespread occasion by setting up various facilities around the nation to help the American People. Several military units will be traveling through the , in areas deemed safe by the personnel in charge of assigned districts, provide supplies to help rebuild all that will be lost and to help those lucky enough to survive. Until then we ask that everyone to stay indoors. Do not go outside unless you feel it be absolutely necessary. Please help provide shelter to anyone who may be caught outside and find ways to defend yourselves and your loved ones. If you are caught outside, please follow the orders of any law enforcement or military personnel as they are permitted to use deadly force if they deem it necessary. Do not make any attempt to confront the men and women in uniform as they are only trying to help keep this country safe for all people.

“I do not wish to make this announcement, but given the magnitude of the situation and the estimated loss of life already, I had no choice. I do wish that everyone makes it out of this horrendous occasion alive and well so we may rebuild the world into a better place.

“Within the next half hour, a list of rules essential to survival will be broadcast on all channels, through all means of communication. It is recommended that everyone not involved in helping our brothers and sisters across the globe restore the fabric of peace follow these rules in order to reduce the casualties that we will face.

“Good luck to everyone. I do pray for all to make it out of this alive. So God bless you. And God bless America.”

“Fucking shit!” I shouted, “It's too late.”

No, it wasn't too late. I knew that it was coming. I had to fight. I was entrusted to help protect the people, and the president of the United States

himself confirmed that everyone was going to need me more than ever. The first step to salvation was to meet with Jerry, so I slammed the gas pedal into the floorboard.

I was ready for war.

PROOF

Chapter 15
Dawn of the War

I made to the bar within the time frame Jerry ordered. It was surprisingly easy to get through the army convoys that quickly filled the streets. Days like that were easily the makings of conspiracy theories; all hell breaks loose thanks to some form of government mind control then the President initiates martial law to capture every living soul in the country. December 21, 2012, became that day.

As I pulled into the parking lot, Jerry was standing next to a large SUV. His car was parked right next to it. The SUV was meant for attack dogs, but it held some supplies for my car. When I got out of the car, I could hear fighting come from inside the bar. The other police officers at the meeting drew their weapons and stormed the building.

"It's about time you got here," he said, "Having trouble with traffic?"

"Oh, you know, them Humvees tend to run a little slow," I joked.

"I am surprised the military popped out so quickly. Then again, nothing like this has ever happened before."

"No, not in the memories printed in textbooks. The shit we are about to see will be too much for history books to document."

"How can you be sure?"

"It's obvious dude. Just wait, things are going to happen nobody would have ever expected," I told him, "So what is it that we need to do here?"

"Mostly getting you and your car rigged up," he answered.

"What do you mean?"

"Come look."

Jerry popped open the back of the SUV to reveal a series of lights and radios meant just for me. The lights were special LED displays that mounted on the front and back windshields of my car, to let everyone know I was assigned authority over the situation. There were two radio sets next to the lights, one for the car and one for me to carry around.

“You gonna help me install these?” I asked Jerry.

“Only cause we are short on time, thankfully these are easy install,” he answered.

Before paying any attention to the dash lights, I went straight for the handheld radio and turned it on. Some military officers were chatting about unidentified aircraft coming in from the south and were preparing to shoot it down.

“Just great, the last fucking thing we need is downed aircraft,” Jerry grunted.

“Something tells me it ain't going to be a jet or helo that will come crashing down.”

“Shut it,” Jerry said, “It's only going to be true if you say it.”

“We have to be prepared Jerry,” I joked, “Nothing is ever going to be the same after this.”

“I know,” he sighed, “Help me get these things to your car, they're a little heavy.”

“Sure.”

I lifted the larger set of lights and took them to my car. The smaller set that Jerry held was meant for the back seat. Mounting the lights was easy thanks to a couple transparent suction cups. The main unit was powered by a switch that plugged directly into the cigarette lighter. The other ran off of a couple D batteries. Between the two, an infrared signal helped synchronize the lighting so the patterns would alternate.

“What about the car radio?” I asked Jerry.

“Just slide it into the gap in your console. It will fit tight enough to stick as long as you don't get into a wreck,” he answered.

“It's going to be hard not to crash in this fucking mess.”

“But you have those alter egos of yours that can jam electrical circuits.”

“It won't take much to get overwhelmed, even with a supernatural assist.”

“Whatever. Just hurry up and start the car so we can test the lights.”

“Alright, alright!”

I adjusted myself in the front seat so I could start my car and check out the new lights by flipping the switch. Bright green and amber lights danced off of nearby buildings.

"What's with the colors?" I asked him.

"In most cases, those are for security agencies. But now, they are to mark special civilians granted police and sometimes military permissions."

"So it marks me as a legal vigilante."

"Yeah, technically you already were considered a legal vigilante, but now you have the gear to look the part."

Three large explosions rang from the sky. Jerry and I both looked up to see a large ball of fire quickly crashing down. The flames shifted from shades of red and orange to waves of green and blue. As the craft came closer to its impact, I could make out that it was a metallic disc with several large holes blasted through it. The front of the disc lifted itself as if something on the inside of it was trying to ease the landing. Somebody was on that craft trying not to die.

Within nanoseconds, the metallic craft crashed landed about a hundred yards from where the bar stood, shaking the entire ground.

"What the Hell was that?!" Jerry screamed.

"Roswell!" I told him.

"Shit!" Jerry screamed as he hurried into his cruiser and bolted towards the crash site. With the police radio in hand, I slammed it into the gap in my dashboard just underneath the radio and followed Jerry. The lights in our rigs were perfectly in sync as we hurried to meet with the crash site. We knew the chaos would drive extraterrestrial parties to intervene, but not like this. I can say with confidence that Jerry and I thought of the same questions as we came closer to the crash site. What was in the craft? Who the hell shot it down? Were there more just like this coming?

As our tires skid into the pavement, while our feet slammed into the breaks, we came close to finding our answers. Jerry drew out his forty-five caliber pistol and clicked off the safety. I manifested the Ashtarian into an assault rifle and joined his side as we both slowly approached the crashed spacecraft just thirty feet from us. Several growls comprised of a series of rapid deep clicks grew louder as we got closer.

"Those are some pissed off lizards," Jerry joked.

"Can you blame them?" I asked, "They just got shot down."

A panel on the ship broke off as something short and covered in pale green scales crawled its way out with a strange neon, blue ball in its right hand. It growled and acted as if it was cursing at us. Jerry stiffened his arm and slid his finger on the trigger.

"Don't shoot, we don't need to aggravate it," I whispered.

Nation Guard rigs approached us with assault rifles and machine guns cocked and ready. The being from the craft started to panic, continuing to scream in its own language. As the creature's clicks and squeals grew louder and the pitch became higher, the ball in its hand sprouted a bright green glow. An

electric scream emerged that drew out all other sounds in the world. The pitch was filled with tiny daggers that drew blood out of every ear that heard it. My mind tried screaming as loud as it could to warn my body about what was happening. I turned to face the Guardsmen that gathered behind Jerry and me, who also was losing blood, and started swinging my arms to signal to them that they need to turn back.

"Get back!" I screamed, "It's a bomb!"

Jerry fired the first shot, killing the being as the bullet buried its way between the creature's eyes. The shot made the screaming ball fall into the downed spaceship as it detonated. Somehow, the craft was able to contain the blast, and only sent metal and scaly flesh flying. The pieces somehow didn't hit Jerry's patrol car or my personal vehicle, but it did leave a mark on the National Guard rigs. While the soldiers slowly regained enough consciousness to realize what happened, Jerry and I used the opportunity to escape in the confusion. Because we weren't military officers, the chances of us going through severe "debriefings" were high. There was still work to be done, so Jerry and I parted ways and finally dived into the original plan.

The plan was to, metaphorically, sanction off areas of town for officers to patrol. There were no defining borders to allow for extra eyes in problem areas, but even then there were gaps in marked areas. Because it was close to the holidays, each officer was asked to pick three to five locations to define their patrol areas. As predicted, many of the officers chose areas of importance to them. Most of them picked special areas that would cover their houses as well as the homes of their loved ones, favorite hangout spots, their kid's school, and maybe places where their buddies worked. Personally, I kept my patrol area so I could an eye on my place and Shandra while also putting some targets on some sick fucks that have been getting too close to kids.

In most cases, cops would lose authority in martial law, but in this case, a very different plan was in place. Police officers, and volunteers such as myself, would serve as the first wave of the cleanup. While we were out on patrol, we were given full authority to neutralize any threats we saw fit. It was emphasized that we kept our targets alive, but we weren't going to be punished if things went south. After we were done with any targets, we were to draw special marks on anything nearby to indicate what the targets were guilty of by using a series of glowing markers that were impossible to get rid of.

A crack was to indicate vandalism. A knife was to indicate murder. A hand was to indicate domestic violence. A thick, horizontal stripe was to show a sex-related incident. A large sack was to show robbery. Arson was to be shown by a single flame. In the event children were involved, we were supposed to add the number eighteen with a downward facing arrow right next to it. "Extra special," treatment was given to those morons. To prevent the wrong people from being accused and hauled away, we utilized the same markers to draw targets on the heads of those we confronted. If you weren't marked, you were safe.

All of the targets which managed to stay in stable enough condition were bundled together like cattle to be shipped to work camps. Those injured or made ill due to their marks are shipped to special hospital wards for treatment using experimental practices. The dead were bagged up and burned into ash. Those with no marks had a choice, either stay where they are to fend for themselves or to enter special facilities for housing. The innocent often stayed inside their homes unless their homes were too dangerous or hazardous to live in.

As the hours went by I utilized every resource I could think of to take down my marks. Since the Ashtarian could shift into anything that comes to mind, I wasn't given any special tools like the cops in order to get the job done. Rather than using handcuffs of plastic ties, I used the Ashtarian to blast the ones I didn't kill with enough of an electrical charge to paralyzed their entire body for forty-eight hours. And rather than drawing on walls with a glowing marker, I used my alien weapon to burn bright green marks thanks to the Ashtarian's partial copper material.

While the battle waged on, I had forgotten about the special guidelines president Slade mentioned in his speech. They were only meant for civilians trying their best to stay out of the chaos, but it was something that every working eye should read. I pulled out my cell phone when the violence seemed to be dying out to check my emails. Needless to say, the President made sure every email that was tied to my phone had a copy of the message.

"To Every American Soul,

"In the following days, martial law will become one of the greatest tests this nation has ever faced, and with these days I each and every one of you these series of favors. I do not expect you all to regard these as the new laws of the land, but I do ask that you follow all of these to the best of your ability. Do these to convince the men and women out on the streets right now that we can rise from these ashes.

"#1 Please stay indoors in this time. If you find yourself in a situation where you are outside, please seek shelter immediately. Several facilities across the nation designed to help the good people survive.

"#2 Please openly help those around you through this tragedy. We are all struggling to make it through this life in some form, don't be foolish and think you are alone.

"#3 Do not be afraid to reach extreme measures to defend your life and the lives of ones you care about. We have thousands of men and women watching the streets, doing everything to protect everyone, but that doesn't strip you of the right to protect yourself or those around you.

"#4 Do your best to extend kindness to those around you. Forgive those who have done you wrong and forget the reasons behind the battles of your past. But never lose the knowledge you have gained. These will become very desperate times and you will never know who you will need to run to for help, or even who will come to you.

"#5 When you are given a chance to settle down, document everything you remember from these desperate times. Future generations need to know what happened so they can prepare in the event history decides to come full circle.

"I wish to say that I sincerely hope that everyone is able to survive this. And to those who have already passed away, please Rest In Peace and guide those still here to their salvation.

"Godspeed,

"President Arthur S. Slade."

I had to admit, rule five was definitely a good idea. Textbooks of the future would be able to tell about what happened, but they would never be able to express the true horror. Soldiers journals never make it to the limelight, simply because they are too truthful. If every lasting survivor wrote their truths, there is nothing that can be done to silence it.

I checked the time on my phone. The display read, "8:30 P.M." About once every thirty minutes, all police officers were required to participate in a head count. This was to help keep an eye on the health and overall well being of everyone on patrol. Dispatch would radio out to all of us using a special format. This was to help keep track of everyone for paperwork at the end of the day, but to also make sure everyone was still alive. There were about seventy of us on duty, sixty-five cops, and five legal vigilantes.

"December 20th, 19:30, police roll call," the dispatcher announced.

"Officer Margaret Wilson, status is tired as hell. I'm over at Bel-Air circle checking up on a domestic violence victim from earlier," said one officer

"Officer Damion Taxon, status is a little sore but alright. I'm in the parking lot of the mall, just wrapped up with a couple graffiti artists and about to head over to the bridge. Does anyone else notice that things are starting to calm down?" asked another.

"Officer Brock Ketchum, status is a little hungry. I am heading towards the old shopping center where the drag racers always meet up. And Taxon, yes I have noticed things have slowed down a bit. I hope you just didn't jinx it."

"Officer Levi Hart, status is fine. I just left the low-income housing part of town, surprisingly no one there is raising hell. And just to be honest, how the Hell are these people have low income when there are several Mustangs and Ferraris that are always there?"

"Officer Ashton Smith, status is a little bored. I am going to sneak over to my place to check on some shady figures that have been running around my neighborhood these last few days. And Taxon, drugs are why those fuckers are getting away being listed as low income."

"L.V. Terrace Evans, status is a little worried. I am over by the old radio station, and I keep hearing chatter about unidentified flying objects coming in from the south. Does anyone know what that is about?"

"L.V. Dakota Frandsen," I said into the radio, "Status is taking a breather. I am parked near Pallet Oaks Park. Evans, all I can really say about what is coming in from the South isn't from this world."

More and more cops and legal vigilantes radioed in to simply signal that they are okay. Because of the chaos, we all threw out the traditional alphanumerical codes to use over the airways... we just wanted to let everyone know we were okay.

Chatter about the National Guard and the flying objects coming from the south filled the waves, nearly pushing everyone to a near mental breakdown. I listened carefully to every voice that came on the air, mentally checking off every name I knew that was out tonight. There was one voice that didn't come across the radio. At first, I waited a few minutes, just in case he was still handling a dangerous situation. But as time moved on, a pit in my stomach appeared. I was afraid that something had gone terribly wrong.

"Dispatch, has officer Tracey Jerome radioed in yet?" I asked.

Seconds passed before she responded, "No Dakota, he hasn't."

"Oh god please no," radioed Evans.

"Chill out guys," said another officer, "He is probably handling a rough target."

"I don't want to take any chances," I growled, "Dispatch, what is officers Jerome's last known location?"

"His cell phone seemed to have died outside his house about ten minutes ago," the dispatcher said.

"Alright, I know it is almost time for the L.V bunch to head home but I am going to check it out. Jerry's sector and mine intersect there so I won't be out of touch," I told her.

"Good luck, Dakota," one of the L.Vs said, "I have a feeling this won't be pretty."

"Thanks, Robert. I'll radio in if I find something."

I slide my phone into my cup holder and slammed on the gas to hurry out to Jerry's house. Something didn't feel right and I needed to make sure that he was okay. This was a dangerous mess and wouldn't take much for blood to spill.

As Jerry's patrol car came into view with the lights still flashing and his driver door still wide open, my tensions were far from easing. I pulled up right behind the cruiser and slammed on the breaks. My tires skid against the road, nearly slamming into Jerry's rear bumper. When my car finally stopped, I switched it over to park and jumped out of my car. I stared at Jerry's house, which was riddled with bullet holes and broken glass. The front windows of his house were broken and blood stains covered every piece. As I got closer to the house, I could see that the bullet holes were actually exit wounds; the shots came from inside. Knowing there was a chance the sick bastards who did this

were nearby, I summoned the Ashtarian into the form of an automatic shotgun.

Just underneath the front door, some fresh blood was pooling. There were going to be bodies on the inside, and they were going to be fresh. I opened the door and was immediately welcomed by the smell of fresh flesh and blood. I started to feel sick as I walked through the house and saw the slaughter. Jerry's wife and daughters were lying in pieces all over the house, their torsos still pumping out blood. Their clothes were torn from their bodies. Their eyes still were frozen in fear. I moved around the house, trying to find Jerry. I kept my finger on the trigger of the Ashtarian, just in case the bastards who killed Jerry's family were still around. The brutality and the way the bodies were dismembered were a very strong resemblance to the girls killed by Jessica's kidnappers.

When Jessica was kidnapped, I was on a predator's adrenaline high. My heart beat so fast driving my body quicker than my senses could comprehend. I was too distracted to notice the smell of rotting flesh and boiled blood. But when I was scouting Jerry's house, the adrenaline wasn't pumping as fast. I did feel a bit nauseous but was moving just enough to avoid bursting into a mental breakdown like most people would.

I made my way through a narrow hallway that looked like it split off into the separate bedrooms of the one story building. The splash of a tiny drop of water tapping on my shoulder stopped me in my tracks. I looked on the shoulder of my jacket to see that the “water” was awfully thick and had an awfully dark red color. A few more drops felt around me, each one nearly identical in size. I looked up to find the source, to find a headless body nailed into the ceiling. The body was still clothed in a policeman's uniform, with Jerry's tag still on the chest. I dematerialized the Ashtarian and drew out my radio. My pulse began to rise as I was staring at the dead body of a friend.

“OFFICER DOWN!” I screamed, “Officer Tracey Jerome is down! I am at his place. Three confirmed bodies, two of which are completely dismembered. Jerome's body is without a fucking head. Blood is fucking everywhere. These bodies are fresh, whoever did it could still be close. I need fucking back-up five minutes ago!”

Within minutes, three ambulances were guided to Jerry's house by five police cruisers and a National Guard rig. The guardsmen and cops set up a perimeter to investigate the scene and while trying to look for any sign of the sick fucks that did this. An hour passed, and nothing was found to help the cause. One item was needed in order to move the case anywhere, Jerry's head. It was nowhere to be found. Not in a bush or in a nearby trash bin. Not in a ditch or in a field. The National Guardsmen sent out a message through every channel available, asking for any help locating anyone that was blood soaked or even carrying anything that remotely resembled a severed head. The mess that was made was too spread out, too horrific, for those who did it to not have some sort of trace blood evidence somewhere on their bodies. If they covered their entire bodies, the blood would seep through everything.

I did everything to point out any possible outcomes that could occur if someone did indeed come into contact with the killers, mostly to point out the blood could very well be mistaken for something else, like a mole or even a pressure mark. Too much chaos was coming out of this for anyone, even the most experienced and highly trained, to make accurate assumptions about anything.

At approximately 22:00, three hours into the investigation of the Jerome family slaughter, I received a phone call that shifted the tides. I was still at Jerry's house, two and a half hours after the legal vigilantes were supposed to go home, trying to help the forensics team find any clues about where to find Jerry's killers when my phone nearly screamed inside my cup holder. The phone display showed Shandra's name alongside a photo of her. I answered the call, only to be welcomed by panicked breathing. I tried to listen in to the background noise as I initiated a conversation.

“Hello?” I asked.

“Dakota,” Shandra whispered, “Please help me!”

“Shandra?” I asked, “Babe, what is going on?”

“Three men broke into my house and killed my mom! Two of them started cutting her to pieces while she was still alive. One of them tried to grab me but I grabbed a knife and stabbed him. It didn't faze him!” Shandra cried, “I am locked in my room. All three of them are trying to get in. Please, I need you!”

“I am on my way, please do everything you can to stay alive!”

Shandra screamed once more, killing the phone line. The bastards that killed Jerry were now after Shandra. 'But why?' I asked myself.

'No time to ask questions, Shandra is going to die if we don't move now!' screamed both of my hunters.

And they were both right. There was no time to stand around and ask about what was happening. Ramona was already dead, and Shandra was somehow making enough of a stand to survive. I had to help her any way I could.

A flashback appeared in my mind's eye as if planted by a spirit, to give me an idea on what I needed to do. It was from a lunch date I had with Shandra when we were dating for about five months at the time. We both sat a table in an old Italian restaurant, talking about how Shandra felt no one was ever truly out there watching over her. Jessica was still mentally recovering from her kidnapping, which was probably what planted the thought in Shandra's mind in the first place. The very words I told her just to ease her mind echoed in my head.

'Shandra, if anything like what happened to Jessica were to happen to you, I would bring an army to free you. You have my word,' I said in my mind.

And that was what exactly needed to be done. I yanked on the

microphone leading into my car's police radio and took a deep breath. It was time I played my hand.

"I need everyone who has 4286 Madison Street in their sectors to go there now! We have three suspects who have slaughtered a cop and his family and now they are after my fiance. I need as much help as I can get. These sick fucks are armed and extremely dangerous. Possibly using heavy drugs, they have received severe injuries without any response. Use extreme caution but don't be afraid to fill the fuckers full of holes," I shouted over the radio.

"You better be fucking serious," Evans replied.

"Please dude, not now. These guys are connected to the kidnapping and torture of Jessica Summers. We need to get going now!"

I jumped all the way into the car and slammed on the gas. The engine screamed in anger. The war was beginning, the fight was on. Mess with me, I level you. Mess with my friends, I bury you. Mess with my family, never be seen again. Shandra and Jessica were my family and these sickos hurt them both. It was time, for whoever the hell they were to go away.

I hurried past every street and every National Guard post just so I could get to Shandra. Some of them even took the lead, knowing that a few very dangerous criminals were on the loose. It would have been best to have somebody quarantine the area while another party went in for the extraction. We didn't need any unnecessary deaths adding to the body count.

As I drove towards Shandra's house; I counted at least twenty L.Vs, cops, and National Guardsmen heading in the same direction. If these guys attacking Shandra were connected to Jessica's kidnappers, and if they were the ones that killed Jerry, there was no way they were going to survive. The law and those who enforce the law are 99% geared to take a woman's side. If a woman, especially a child is killed, there will be starving bloodhounds ready to rip you to shreds. If you killed a cop, demons with assault rifles will burst through your front door.

These bastards promoted themselves to the Devil himself, armed with his own pack of acid drooling hell hounds.

Two minutes is all it took for me to get to Shandra's house when the distance between there and Jerry's house usually brought up a twenty minute trip in heavy traffic. I paid no attention to the screaming souls as they were being fired upon. I paid no glance to the gutsy teenagers that tried to save the life of a mischievous friend. I paid not a single ear wave to the growling dogs and cats as they tried their best to defend their owners. The chaos had died down, but when I announced that an officer of the law was dead more chaos soon leaked into the streets. The people responsible were delusional, thinking that Jerry's killers were some sort of saviors from a military overrun. They were fools. They themselves allowed for petty excuses and tiffs to become all out wars, we were the ones trying to keep them safe. The people forced martial law upon themselves, just to give the military an excuse to clean up the world Old West style. If there was a problem, just shoot it.

I don't know why my mind filled itself with these thoughts. Perhaps it was its own way of justifying what was going on. The things I saw happen, to completely good and innocent people, were so awful the only conclusion I could come to is that in some unknown form, they had it coming. Isn't it funny how we all tend to think that way when something awful happens? Isn't it weird that our first response to an awful event usually sounds along the lines of, “they didn't deserve this,” or, “this isn't right?” We all know that the world is a messed up place, yet we just sit back and take what comes to us because even though we plead that that nothing was done to instigate it, yet deep within our hearts we actually do believe that we are solely responsible for the horrors we face. The most disturbing part of these events is that nothing was done in order to correct the horrors before they had a chance to begin.

It was too late to prevent Shandra from meeting harm, but it wasn't too late to keep her from dying. When I finally arrived at the house, a barricade was established using every vehicle that drove to the location. The engines were still running in most of them, but each one was completely empty of any presence. The drivers of the National Guard rigs were even missing. As I parked my car just outside the barricade and peaked inside the home, I knew exactly why everyone was gone. Shandra's house, a fortress that was only ever damaged from the inside was now decimated. Large holes were now on the sides of the building where severed body parts were thrown. Holes in every inch of the house where bullets flew both in and outward. Windows were shattered. Fresh, liquid blood covered nearly everything in sight.

As I got out of my car, I manifested the Ashtarian into two Tommy guns loaded with explosive rounds. With a gun in each hand, I hurried inside to inspect the mess. Sure enough the further into the house you reached, the messier it became. Blood from at least twenty bodies, if not more, was so thick it managed to pool on carpet floors. It was impossible to step anywhere without having the blood soak into your shoes as if it was hiding for dear life. The severed body parts of everyone that managed to arrive before me were still slowly losing more blood, each source fresher than the last.

I walked through the house, trying my best to ignore the warm ooze that soaked into my shoes when several faint clicks caught my attention. Each click the whispered in my ear sounded as if someone was pressing their tongue against the roof of their mouth and pushed it forward. I looked around trying to find the source when soon a severed head that moved on its own caught my attention.

“Oh my god! Evans!” I whispered as I rushed to his side.

Evans did what he could to wiggle his ears to let me know that it was him. His body laid about five feet away from his head, yet he was still alive. I tried to say something, but any words that came to mind were too scared to let themselves known. I watched carefully as he moved his lips as if he was trying to say something. I was never good at reading lips, but from what I could tell, he was trying to tell me to run. Within a matter of seconds, the entire head stopped moving. The color of his skin and the look in his eyes seemed to drain away. He

was finally dead. My arms dropped with my weapons pointing towards the floor.

The human head can only last for a few moments after it is cut off. That fact alone was enough to make me realize that I had missed a brutal slaughter by a matter of seconds. Knowing that also allowed for a deep fear to grow within my heart. If I was seconds away from the deaths of these people... was it too late to save Shandra? Three large bangs and a panicking scream coming from the other side of the house gave me an answer.

I readied my weapons and stormed the hallway leading to Shandra's bedroom. Just in front of her door stood two assailants dressed in completely black attire, of course, painted in fresh streaks of blood, slamming their feet and fists against the door. How the door screamed in agony, indicated that Shandra managed to barricade it off. She was doing everything she could to put up a fight, and I honestly can say I could be any more proud to call her my fiance. She was doing everything she could to survive, at least long enough for me to give her a hand.

“Get the fuck away from her!” I screamed.

Both assailants turned their heads to face me. Both of their faces were hidden behind black masks. Both growled like starving demons, in ways that sound like they were shouting demonic taunts in another language. I readied my weapons as they charged towards me and opened fire. The explosive rounds helped tear through their skin, killing them both on the spot. Their flesh was pale and their blood was black. It wasn't hard to tell these guys were some form of demons. So it was probably best that tiny amounts of holy water were released with the explosive rounds made impact.

Both assailants went down without any extra fight. Their bodies emitted strong odors and heat that nearly singed the ends of every hair on my body as I stepped over them to get to Shandra's door. I could hear the sound of glass being tapped against as another demonic voice was taunting Shandra. She whispered something under her breath, almost as if she was in a trance. I knew enough to correctly assume that she was alive.

'Shandra, can you hear me?' I telepathically asked.

'Dakota? Where are you?' she asked.

'I am just outside your door. When I get through, I need you to roll away from the window as fast as you can.'

'Okay, just hurry!'

My heart started to beat even faster as I made the Ashtarian form into a single weapon, a double barreled Tommy gun. It still had the explosive rounds, but the punch of the bullets themselves doubled. This last bastard obviously was different from the first two. His methods of taunting Shandra were more human in nature rather than being beast-like. I wanted to give him extra special treatment.

Before I made my assault, my Shadow and Light Hunter's joined my

side. Shadow had used his Ashtarian to form a set of diamond edged claws around his fingers while Light had no weapons stocked at all.

"Looks like you can use our help," joked Shadow.

"Just shut up and help me get Shandra out of there!" I yelled.

Both of them instantly readied themselves for the final attack. There was no need for us to detail any sort of plan because it was already known among us. And as my sized eighteen foot slammed itself into Shandra's bedroom, finally breaking it open, we attacked. The hunters each burst through my chest as I made the first move by opening fire on the final assailant. As the bullets whistled through the air, impaling the glass window, Shandra rolled off her bed as ordered. Her entire body was being shielded by my Light hunter as he took the time to heal her wounds. I stood at the bedroom entrance, continuing to shoot the third assailant. The enemy was taking the barrage of bullets, acting as if each one was nothing more than stones beating against his body. Some of the bullets missed and struck a nearby house.

My Shadow Hunter flew through the flying bullets and the remainder of the window and sank his claws into the assailant's skin, quickly ripping him to shreds. Shandra's attacker screamed like a wounded wolf until Shadow took the time to slowly rip off his head, finally silencing him. Once the screams were gone, I dematerialized my Ashtarian and walked over to where my Light Hunter was kneeling over to protect Shandra. I got down into the same position as my Light Hunter went back into my body just so I could check on my fiance.

"I am glad to see that you are safe, my Cherry Blossom," I smiled.

Shandra's eyes slowly opened just so she could see me. Once she realized that it was, in fact, me that saved her life once again, she leaped forward and wrapped her arms around me.

"Dakota, I was so scared," she cried.

"I know, babe, I know," I whispered, "I came as fast as I could."

"Thank you! Can we just get out of here? I can't take much more of this!"

"Dakota, you may want to see this," warned my Shadow Hunter.

"Be there in a second," I told him. I took a moment to lean in and give Shandra a gentle kiss. "I am just glad that you are alive," I whispered to her before getting up to check on the body. I hurdled through the completely shattered window to stand next to my Shadow Hunter. He had ripped away the mask the final assailant was wearing just so we could find out who he was. I stared at the severed head in complete shock. I did know who this person was, simply because I knew his father. Shandra's assailant was John Ferri, Clemente Ferri's son!

Knowing who the assailant was, I manifested the Ashtarian into an old World War styled flame thrower and burned the body. Something told me that John was going to try and make a comeback. If I burned the body, it would at

least make things harder.

“You two better get out of here before the rest of the National Guard shows up, they are going to get a bit restless because of the radio silence,” suggested my Shadow Hunter.

“You're right, it is only going to be a matter of seconds before this place is swarmed,” I said.

I took out my radio and tried to listen in on the chatter, but the signal wasn't coming through. Occasionally a single word would come out clearly, but the frequencies were too jammed to do anything.

“Is everything okay?” Shandra asked.

“Yeah, it is just that something is jamming the radios,” I answered, “We should probably get moving. Maybe we will move away from whatever is causing the interference.”

Shandra stood as she tried her best to meet me by her window. Each step she took seemed shakier than the last, it was obvious she was still consumed by fear.

“Any ideas on what happened?” she asked.

“Probably some idiot took out the nearest tower, nothing much to really worry about,” I said.

Despite everything that had happened, I somehow thought it was better to simply try to keep a positive spin on what was happening all around us. There was no need to start panicking more than usual, but to be honest I wouldn't be surprised if I was right. The radio stations in town sometimes had a problem with the signal going out because of power issues, ironically most of which would happen around holidays people were likely drinking.

“Okay,” she whispered, “You're probably right.”

I walked over to Shandra, eventually meeting her in the middle of the room. We both took a moment to simply get lost in each other's eyes before hurrying out of the blood-painted home. We both rushed to my car, eager to drive away. As my foot pressed on the gas pedal and my hand adjusted the transmission, the signals on the radio started to clear up. The sounds of many soldiers screaming through the airwaves as they tried to dig up information about their dead comrades. Many of them were asking for me by name. I grabbed the microphone to my car radio and opened the line so I could finally give them the answers they were requesting.

“This is L.V Dakota Frandsen, I just departed from 4286 Madison Street. We need clean up units there soon to gather the dismembered bodies of at least twenty people, all L.Vs or officers, and the three bodies of the assailants responsible for the deaths of Officer Tracey Jerome and his family. From the looks of the scene, the twenty officers that responded to my radio transmission earlier, leading them to the same address, resulted in each one of them dying a brutal death. The severed head of L.V Terrance Evans was, however, still alive

when I arrived on scene. Even though he wasn't able to speak, it felt as if he was trying to warn me about the assailants before finally passing away. In response to the warnings and the deaths of my comrades, I single handily gunned down two of the assailants using explosive rounds, seemingly killing them both instantly. The third assailant was more resistant to the rounds, forcing me to resort to cutting his head off to finally get him to die. I have extracted the last living occupant of the house and I am taking her to a safe location. I am also announcing my retirement from the night. To everyone else that is remaining, good luck out there," I announced.

Immediately other soldiers and officers responded, and in the same instant I shut off both of my radios. Shandra needed me to be with her that night. And in truth, I needed to see her. Actually seeing the dismembered bodies in the daylight was something I could never forget. It took everything I could do in order to keep from breaking down, but it was all barely working. I just needed a couple hours with someone I could trust, just so I could let it all out. Shandra also felt this way, even though she was barely able to speak.

As we hurried home and locked ourselves in the house, the moment we were both waiting for overcame us both. Our arms became rocky mountains as they sealed us together. Waters sprouted from our eyes as we took the one chance we finally had to release all of our emotion. Every bit of fear, anger, agony, longing, anything our minds held back came out of us. We had no control.

For a brief moment, our cries faded into silence and our bodies pulled away just enough so we could look into each other's eyes once more. Nothing stopped us as Shandra leaped upward and wrapped her legs around my waist. Nothing held us back as our lips dined upon each other's divine nectars and our clothes slowly came off. Nothing in the world as we made our way up the stairs and into our bedroom. The sheets comforted us as our skins became tangled together and our hearts synced to the same beat. That night we embraced each other, like never before, as we finally reached the point in our relationships the morons from school thought we had been doing all this time.

About an hour later, we both passed out as we enjoyed the warm aura that surrounded us both. It was a cold winter night to the outside world, yet to us, it felt like a warm paradise.

I don't exactly remember how long we slept before Shandra got up in the middle of the night. What I do remember is that the vibrations from her getting off of my bed jarred me awake just enough to be able to read the time on my digital clock. It was just shortly after midnight, at least from what I could tell. Shandra's bare skin glistened in the moonlight as she quickly slipped on nothing more than one of my old t-shirts and a black pair of panties.

"Hey you," I whispered, "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, that was..." she smiled, "...amazing."

"It was. I know that we both agreed that we would wait until after we got out of school before we got that far, but I'm sorry that last night I couldn't

control myself."

She stared at me with the most sincere look in her eye as she said, "You don't have to be sorry Dakota. I couldn't control myself either. It just felt nice that this time it was mutual."

"Hey," I whispered while sitting up behind her, "You know I would never do that to you."

The parts of Shandra that thought the person she would end up falling for would be just like her abusive still lingered within her. It was obvious that those thoughts have gotten weaker, which made her one of the lucky cases. What happened to her will always be inside her, and even pass on to our children and grandchildren. Since she was slowly overcoming the battle that was inside her, that was a definite sign of hope for what was to come.

"I know," she whispered, "Now go back to sleep, I am just going to get something to drink."

"Okay!" I said as I flopped back to my side of the bed.

I heard Shandra giggle as she walked out of our bedroom and downstairs into the kitchen. As she sorted through the cupboards, trying to pick out a glass, I turned to face my old alarm clock to check the time. My vision was initially a little blurry but as it cleared up I could see that Shandra and I were only asleep for about two hours. The display on my alarm clock displayed both the date and time. In that particular moment, the display froze on "12/21/12 12:21.12." I lifted my head up to get a better look at the clock as the numbers on the display started to slide together, eventually forming the number 666 dead center of the display.

I kept shaking my head, hoping to shake myself from some messed up hallucination, but nothing would work. The same numbers were on the display every time I looked. Normally when those numbers appeared it would take a few weeks before the trouble began, but the screams of shattered glass and frightened women indicated otherwise.

"Dakota! It's them!" Shandra screamed.

I ripped the sheets from my body and slipped on some pants before running down the stairs to find out was going on. I don't ever remember my feet touching the ground as my eyes met Shandra held against the chest of a man who had been horribly burned. My fists clenched, ready to take on Shandra's attackers once again, but a bullet buried screamed as it buried itself into my skull.

"DAKOTA!" Shandra screamed as the demonic thugs took her away.

My entire body felt weak, I couldn't move anything. I was just conscious to sense Shandra's pain. They held a blade to her throat as they lead her into a large van. Once she was inside, I could no longer sense her and my body could no longer cage my soul.

As my spirit moved on to the gates of heaven, I could hear voices in the

distance. I remembered from my past visits, that heaven glowed bright blue. But this time, the air and clouds looked like gold. Rather than feelings of peace and harmony, there was brutality and intensity in the air. Grunting and shouting in the distance quickly became louder. I could make out the shadows of thousands in the distance rapidly moving around.

The sounds were soon drowned out by the screams of two large ravens. Each one flew down and perched itself onto the ground as a large older man dressed in Viking armor appeared. He had only one eye and wielded a long spear. I couldn't believe who I was seeing, I was in the presence of a god, known as "The All Father." Thor's father, Odin was greeting me within the realm of Asgard.

"You. Why am I here?" I asked.

He aimed the end of his spear towards my chest, quickly shooting a burning blue streak of lightning that sent me away. I remember being surrounded by a burning blue beam of light before finding myself in front of my old high school, now in ruins. Somehow Odin had found a way to make me appear just fifty feet away from what was the front entrance of the school. I didn't know why I was there until I heard a familiar voice scream for me in agony.

The building itself was entirely destroyed, almost appearing to have suffered some sort of explosion just moments before I had arrived. I looked down to my body to see that I was fully clothed, dressed in a black button-down shirt and black khakis. Covering my body was my large leather trench coat and my head was shielded by my black fedora. I was in my full uniform, without any memory of actually getting dressed. Too many thoughts flowed through my mind at once to focus on what was happening. As I was taking heavy fire from Suits stationed just outside the school, my mind finally pieced together the reason why I was still alive. I wasn't done fighting.

I took cover behind a large boulder that stood in front of the school and summoned the Ashtarian into a large machine gun and opened fire. As the bodies of the Suits fell, I continued my assault. The hallways once filled with mindless zombies known as the student body were now barren. I expected more Suits or some form of guards in the place. There had to be some reason why Odin himself sent me here. There had to be some grand or noble goal that I was supposed to achieve.

I walked through a straight hallway, making my steps as light as possible so they wouldn't make any noise. As I made my way towards the gyms, I heard the sounds of flesh beating against each other. I could hear bones being cracked and broken in after loud smacks rang in the distance. Muffled cries tried screaming for help after each blow. The noise grew louder as I came closer to the gyms. How the sound danced through the halls made it nearly impossible to tell where the struggle came from. When I was just five feet away from the gym entrance, Jerry's severed head was thrown from the doors to my left.

"Dakota," taunted a voice, "Come on in!"

The bastard sounded almost like he was some sort of game show host. This is all some sort playtime to them. I changed the Ashtarian into the form of a large pistol and entered the gym. I fired seven shots into three demonic goons that stood around John Ferri as he had Shandra bound together and on her knees. Duct tape covered her mouth as it camouflaged her screams from the knife that rested on her neck as it took a few sips of her blood.

John's lips were sealed together from my flamethrower, so he couldn't have been the one who called for me. I looked around, noting every potential hiding spot that an unseen threat could emerge from. The gym was perhaps one of the most destroyed rooms in the school, with a large chunk of the walls and ceiling now missing. Anybody could hide anywhere within the debris and not be seen by anything.

"It has been a while, Dakota. Good to see that you and the Suits have gotten to know one another," the voice shouted.

"Why don't you come on out?" I asked, "So that we can become acquainted with one another."

Two shots fired from behind John and Shandra, striking me at the tips of my shoulders. Bits of my bones flew off of my body. Whoever took the shots was trying to clip my arms, but couldn't aim for shit in order to get the job done. A man walked up from behind John. He looked oddly familiar. His body looked frail and pale. Something in my gut told me that the man was involved in something dark.

"Cortez, you look like shit," I said to him.

"Nice to see you too, Mr. Frandsen," he replied.

John tightened his wrist as if he was getting ready to slit Shandra's throat open. I took the Ashtarian and fired three bullets in what was left of his head.

"Take it easy, Gunny, you and I both know Death is negligent to take us," Cortez laughed, "So why don't you set aside your space gun so we talk this out."

Setting my gun aside is probably the worst move that could be done in these types of situations, but I didn't have much choice. But I also knew that there was something Cortez wanted from me, and that was my bargaining chip.

"You know what, I will," I shouted, "But only if you get your brain dead goon there to get that knife away from my fiance's neck."

Cortez bobbled his head around as he pondered the idea. Eventually, his face showed that he agreed to the terms.

"Alright fine," he said.

I watched as he closed his eyes and mouthed an order. Cortez was always the type to lip sync to his own thoughts, so I knew that he was giving John to get the knife away from Shandra. However, John still held Shandra as a hostage. It wasn't an optimal situation, but it did give me a moment to de-

escalate the situation. Once I guaranteed that there wasn't going to be some sort of trick, I dematerialized the Ashtarian just to level the playing field.

"I am surprised you actually followed through," Cortez shouted.

"I am a man of my word," I replied, "But since we are here, mind if I ask you something?"

"Go right ahead. I was actually waiting for you to start."

"Why? Why go after me and my friends? Why cause this chaos?"

"Unfortunately, son, what you're asking is a very broad and very complex topic."

"Then start with the kidnappings, since that is where you become the most relevant."

"Well, you're not wrong."

A gust of wind swept the ground between us as Cortez took a deep breath. He warned me that it was going to a long story, so he took a few moments to in order to prepare to tell it.

"Ever hear of a project known as 'SoulWeb' that started about a decade ago?" Cortez asked.

"I have heard the name before, but I am pretty sure we're not thinking of the same thing," I answered.

"Figures. Well, in short, the project initially was meant to study psychic phenomena. Some try to say that it was a knockoff of Project Stargate, with the only difference really being how the phenomena were studied."

"Go on."

"You see, Project Stargate was a test to find out how to use psychic powers. SoulWeb was actually meant to discover how such things were possible. The tests initially were meant to discover what happens to the mind, and even the physical environment, when psychic phenomenon is active. First, they tested events such as astral projection, prophetic dreams, telepathy, and even telekinesis and their results were amazing."

"What did they find?"

"Nothing that you and I don't already know. But they didn't stop there. They wanted to see if accounts of weather manipulation and spontaneous healing could also be tested, which is actually where you and your friends actually came in after a certain Ronald Ford gave the scientists running the tests all of the information."

Shandra's head jerked upward when she heard her father's name.

'Dakota, what does he mean?' Shandra asked telepathically.

Before I could answer, Cortez noticed that my eyes were linked to Shandra. Somehow he knew we were communicating, and that only made him giddy.

“Oh shit, I forgot! Shandra didn't know about that detail, I'm so sorry,” he laughed.

He turned his head to face Shandra.

“Guess what, Shandra! Your father, and I mean your biological father, is alive. He has been working for a secret government agency, secretly sending funds to help take care of you and your mother,” Cortez laughed, “And the best part? He and your fiance have been working together since... a few months after you two got together if my memory serves correct!”

Cortez pulled out a pistol and shot John in the eye. As the body of his lifeless goon fell to the ground, Cortez walked behind Shandra and picked up the knife John dropped. As he grabbed Shandra and pressed the knife against the left side of Shandra's throat after throwing her to her knees.

'Kill him, Dakota! Just do it,' Shandra mentally screamed.

“Going back to SoulWeb, because of the information Ford gave the gentleman in charge, you and your friends were studied. You all even helped put this together, from summoning the demons to killing people that stood in the way of the plan. However more interest was placed in you considering how many times you have died and come back to life,” Cortez said.

“GABRIEL!” shouted another male voice, “Let my daughter go!”

I looked around Cortez and Shandra to find out who was yelling. Ford was standing with about five human Suits just about thirty feet from us. Each one of them was aiming their pistols at Cortez, ready to take him out.

Cortez forced Shandra around just so she could get a look at her long lost father. When she finally saw him, the dams in her eyes burst open. She was finally seeing her father whom she thought was dead for almost a decade.

'Dakota... is that...' she whispered in her mind.

'Yes, Shandra, that is your dad,' I interrupted.

“Look, sweetie, there is your daddy,” Cortez taunted.

Shandra tried jerking free from Cortez so she could be by her father's side, but she was held too tightly. There wasn't anything she could do in order to get away.

“Shandra, I know you are scared and probably very confused right now,” Ford shouted, “But I just need you to stay calm for me, honey.”

“Shandra, please listen to him. We kept this all a secret in order to protect you,” I shouted, “Just keep fighting, my Cherry Blossom.”

Something about what I triggered a spark in her eye. I could see the gears inside her mind turning, she was plotting her escape. Her father's face dropped as Shandra jerked her head backward and striking Cortez right in the crotch. As she rose, a flicker of hope for her safety grew in my heart. She was going to make it.

“You stupid bitch,” Cortez grunted as he stretched his arm out and slit

her throat open, nearly taking Shandra's head completely off.

Ford screamed at the sight of his murdered daughter. My heart sank lower and lower as the pool of blood around Shandra's head grew larger and larger. I dropped to my knees, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I fought so hard to keep what was in front of me from happening.

“Hey cousin, fill them full of holes!” Cortez ordered.

One of the agents clicked his pistol, turned it towards the other agents, and open fire. Ford and the other five Suits were immediately killed.

“Let's hope your cunt fiance picked up a few tricks from you,” Cortez snickered, “Too bad SoulWeb never figured out how you came back to life. Then again, maybe they already have in another universe.”

A large bang sounded off in my mind. How fucking dare he talk about Shandra like that! My Shadow and Light Hunters felt the same anger as they appeared from nowhere and killed Cortez and his cousin. I crawled over to Shandra and rolled her lifeless body into my lap. My heart tried everything it could to revive her, even emitting a bright white light that healed her neck, but it was too late. The damage was too severe to save her.

I started bawling as I heard my grandfather's voice say that it was too late for her. My hand guided its way up the body I was cherishing just minutes before and gently closed her eyelids. All of the sudden, I noticed a familiar blue glow coming off of her engagement ring. I felt drawn to the glimmer as if a child-like voice was inviting me to come play. My hand grabbed the top of Shandra's and nested itself right next to the ring. A vision started to appear in my mind, one that the ring was put together.

I closed my eyes for a moment to allow the vision to manifest itself. When I opened them again, I was standing in a valley full of cherry blossoms standing behind a woman of average with a curvy body. She was wearing nothing more than my old shirt and a pair of black panties. Her arms were crossed as if she was waiting for something to happen.

“Hey you,” I smiled.

She jumped and turned around to face me. Her face dropped in shock of seeing me, almost like she couldn't believe I was actually standing there.

“Dakota, is that really you?” she asked.

“Yes, I'm here.”

She ran up to me like an excited little kid greeting a parent who had been away for a long time. When her body pounded against mine, I had to take a few steps back to keep from falling. My balance, however, soon restored itself once my lips were welcomed but the sweet nectar and soft touch of Shandra's kisses. When she was finally done welcoming me, she dropped down in front of me with her hands pressed against my chest.

“Do you know where we are?” she asked, “This place feels like a dream.”

The cheers and giggles of a family at play emerged from behind Shandra. My eyes drifted from the top of her head to meet the eyes of the silhouettes in the distance. They were the same silhouettes from the dream-like

“Because this was a dream. One that I had shortly after we met,” I answered her, “Just turn around and look.”

Shandra turned away from me to face the happy family. The smile on her face grew in admiration of the sight. I rested my hand on her shoulder as I watched everything unfold. Every movement the happy family made matched exactly how I remembered it from the original dream. Mere moments passed before the silhouettes disappeared and a freshwater stream appeared right under our feet. We each wiggled our toes as we realize the clothes on our bodies suddenly changed. Shandra was dressed in a bright orange tank top with an even brighter flower pattern scattered all over and khaki shorts. I was now in a bright red t-shirt and jean shorts.

“What's going on?” Shandra asked.

Before I could answer her question, two tiny hands tugged on our shorts. We both looked down to find our daughter grinning from ear to ear.

“Mommy! Daddy! Come on let's play!” she squealed.

Shandra and I both accepted the invitation and joined Olivia in splashing and frolicking in the stream. We all splashed and swam and drank the water, creating the peaceful family image we all hoped for. The water was cold, but our hearts kept us warm. Nothing in the world could bother us. Soon Shandra and Olivia teamed up on me in order to push my large body into the water. As I fell backward, instead of water breaking my fall, my body was slammed against soft grass. The stream had disappeared and the clothes on me and Shandra both changed back to what they were before. Olivia had also disappeared, leaving behind only her tearful whimpers coming from all directions. Shandra and I both looked around, to find that the cherry blossoms were now barren, broken, and burnt. The grass underneath and all around us had turned black. It looked like we were in the epicenter of an explosion.

Shandra turned her head to let her eyes lock themselves into mine. A part of her knew what was happening, and what the space around us was trying to say. The beautiful images we created together were nothing. With each tear that fled from her eyes and beat against my cheek, pleading for help, I could tell there was still one question she needed to be answered.

“What is going to happen to Olivia?” she asked.

I slammed my head against the ground and burst into tears. I never thought of what would happen to our time-traveling daughter now that Shandra was dead, I didn't have much of a chance.

In life, people prepare to lose their grandparents. They prepare to lose their parents, maybe even their siblings. Even though it is a thought no genuine heart ever desires, people even prepare to lose their spouse. But under no condition, whether foreseen or not, does one prepare to lose their child. Olivia

may not have been born yet, but she was very much alive to us. It wasn't until the dream of cherry blossoms that we even got somewhat of a chance to hold her. Now we were losing her. I was losing both of them.

As Olivia's whimpers faded away, something emerged in my mind. I wrapped my arms around Shandra and pressed her head against my chest. My heart caressed her cheek as I prepared for what I needed to say.

"I don't know," I answered, "But I do know, that this will not be the last time we see this place."

"How is that even going to be possible?" she asked.

"I don't know, but we will find a way. Even if I have to plant every single one of these trees by myself in order to do it."

Shandra wiggled her way up my body and free of my hug. She pressed her lips against mine, causing her entire body to emit a gorgeous golden light as wings sprouted from her back. I could barely see her face as she whispered the words, "Thank you." I stayed lying on my back as I watched Shandra's spirit fly away.

Mere seconds passed as I watched her spin and twirl her way so her head would be pointed directly to the sky. Every move she made caused her body to grow brighter and brighter. As soon as she got so high, it looked like she could bust through the heavens themselves, her glow quickly disappeared. In the silence, I stood up and straightened my clothing as I stared at the very spot Shandra flew to. Soon my eyes were greeted by a large flash of light, brighter than the sun itself. The glow seemed to burn like the face of a raging warrior as it sent down two pulsating strikes of lightning that revealed my Shadow and Light Hunters in full uniform.

We all stood in a perfect triangle, hardly moved by the strong wind that manifested itself. All three of us reached our hands into the middle of the triangle, igniting a powerful energy that overtook all three of us, yet it did not harm us. together we spun like an engine that ran off the powers of the universe. Everything moved so fast, the ground under us was set on fire. The flames launched us into the sky. From the heavens, the three of us combined into one body, me. From below, I could see fires that formed the symbol for my team, the Paranormal Raider Force. The symbol quickly grew larger in size as I flew away. When I had flown far enough, a strong wind terminated the fires and ripped apart what was left of the valley. However, soon it became obvious that it was no ordinary wind. It was a nuclear explosion.

The explosion in my vision was enough to jolt me back into reality. My eyes opened to find myself back at the school, with a dead Shandra lying in my lap. Somehow, during the vision, even more, the damage was inflicted to the entire area. There was another explosion, leaving only Shandra and me unharmed. The bodies of Cortez, Ford, and everyone were obliterated. Only their shadows remained painted against the ground they stood. Just by my vision alone had seemed that Shandra and I were alone. My ears had yet to return to normal, as they were ringing after having to leap from one blast in a dream

world to the blast zone within reality. Somehow, rather than being a nuisance, the ringing brought me peace. I could simply have a few moments alone with Shandra to say my goodbyes.

I removed the tape from her mouth, only to find her lips in a surprising formation. Rather than being in anguish, agony, or sorrow, Shandra's lips and eyes showed that in her final moments she felt serenity. Her neck was also healed, but her body was too pale in for it to be inhabited by any soul. I leaned in and planted a kiss upon her forehead, while my tears took the time to frame her face. She was truly a beautiful girl, one that I was able to call my own. But now she is gone.

I placed both of my arms just underneath her body and gently slid her to the ground. As I stood up, I took the time to place her arms against her chest and closed her eyelids. She didn't deserve to be lied out like roadkill. When I was finished with Shandra, my hearing was welcomed by the sounds clicking rifles. I looked around to find that the National Guardsmen I was helping were aiming their rifles at me, each one holding their index finger around the triggers. I slowly rose my hands up to surrender, just to let them know I wasn't going to fight. But I moved just a little too fast for comfort.

“OPEN FIRE!”

Chapter 16
The War Has Begun

My body was torn apart by a barrage of bullets. The way the rounds made my body move around so much it must've caused me to bump into Shandra. Once the soldiers stopped firing their weapons, I fell chest first into the ground. I used my remaining strength to place my palm inside Shandra's left hand. Her head was turned to the side with her eyes wide open, staring at me. The look of serenity from before had changed into one that looked more nurturing as if Shandra herself was trying to convince me to continue fighting.

As I lied on the ground, the soldiers started to surround mine and Shandra's bodies, thinking that we were both dead. Four men came together to carry me away from the scene, while two others took the time to make a bonfire from Shandra's body. I could tell that some sort of chatter was going on between the soldiers, but I was too weak to understand anything. Soon my body to started to shut down completely. I had no clue if I was dead or alive.

My suspicions were cleared when I woke up inside a cell, much like the ones I saw the day Ford told me that he was Shandra's biological father. And much to my surprise, I was wearing a bright orange jumpsuit this time. But something was different about this particular place. The design was off, everything looked as if I was in a completely different facility. Moments after I was up, I was given an electric jolt by a large plastic cattle prod. I never left that cell for months, not even to use the restroom, while being exposed to several interrogations and tests. The questions they asked started out with were the typical questions on a hospital admittance form. At first, I answered everything to the best of my knowledge, until they started prying about my psychic episodes.

Each time I refused to answer or provided them with a nice big helping

of “Fuck you,” that is when the cattle prods started coming out of the woodwork. They kept pushing for me to answer, or at least use my abilities to retaliate. For some reason, my Hunters wouldn't come to try to help me escape and I couldn't bring out the Ashtarian to blast my way out. I tried several times, but the same results would come each time. Nothing.

I lost track of the days I spent in that cage. I will admit, the food tasted pretty good. But after four months of captivity, the scientists let me out. However, instead of setting me free, I was moved to another facility. This one was equipped with a special simulation room, meant for training psychic super soldiers. However, I wasn't given the luxury of some high tech video game or some sort of virtual reality device. The simulations were comprised of very high tech and very detailed holograms. One of the machine operators was kind enough to explain that the visuals were meant to trick the mind into thinking it was injured, so in an actual battle scenario, it would take losing entire limbs before you would actually realize that you were hurt.

Needless to say, that fucking machine did as it was supposed to. The images it generated were so realistic, every time I was “shot” by the generated bogey I would actually feel the wound and see the blood coming out of me as I faced monsters and soldiers alike. I wanted to find a way to break apart the machine, but even my psychic abilities were confused. So I did everything I could to make it through the simulations and I don't even know how long the tests went.

Finally, some higher up decided that it was time for my “initiation.” Something told me that the person who made the call was one of the higher ups in the shadow government, and they were wanting me in their army. Long story short, the ones conspiracy theorists referred to as the “Illuminati” or “Big Brother” wanted my help in their plans to bring about the New World Order. Or perhaps the better name for them would be the one used by the Suits themselves, The Council.

Just to discuss the details of my recruitment, I was taken into a large room with five judges' podiums that each stood twenty feet tall. Five men each sat at each podium, their faces covered in shadow. I stood dead center of the room, in the middle of a dark red carpet with a large inverted pentagram printed across it, waiting for the five shadow men to speak. I could barely move from that spot thanks to the several tons of restraints that were placed on me.

“Dakota Frandsen. Age is sixteen years. Height is about six feet and six inches. Weight is about three hundred fifty pounds. Is noted on a federal watch list as a potential domestic terrorist under the terms of vigilante justice. Is noted to have potentially died and come back to life at least five times due to unknown factors. Also, has several connections to law enforcement, and through the help of our own Ronald Ford and Tracey Jerome, both now deceased, was able to commit acts of vigilante justice without any legal consequence. Engaged to a Shandra Ford, Ronald Ford's long-lost daughter, who is now deceased. You and Shandra both went to the same high school and started dating shortly after you let her stay at your place after a nasty domestic dispute at her home,” ranted one

of the Shadow Men.

"Throughout this series of events and more that my colleague didn't get to, you exhibited abilities well beyond the normal human capacity. Such abilities included; telekinesis, telepathy, teleportation, advanced healing, energy manipulation, weather manipulation, psychic foresight, astral projection, episodes of feral rage, clairvoyance, and several others that don't even have labels. You have never labeled yourself as a psychic, only as someone who has a few tricks up his sleeve. Tie that to some of the physical skills you have exhibited is the reason why you are here," another added.

"So, what? Are you guys here to rant about me like some sort of legend or are you going to recruit me?" I asked them.

"That depends on you," shouted a third.

"Give me a few more details," I ordered.

"Normally, we would have you start out as a scout. But given your history, we decided to give you a high ranking position within the military. You will all of the troops, weapons, and supplies you would need to help us win this war," said the fourth.

"Your family and a few of your friends will be guaranteed shelter," added the first shadow man.

I clenched both of my fists, sending electric shocks through the restraints.

"Thanks to you fuckers, my family is dead!" I screamed.

"Wrong, we took them into custody," screamed the fifth.

"Do you think I am stupid, you fat pig?!" I screamed back, busting all of my restraints.

"Dakota, take it easy. Cortez was authorized to work on his own agenda. We had nothing to do with his actions," said the third shadow man.

Without any further word from me, both my Shadow and Light Hunters appeared to my sides with their Ashtarians in hand. Both of them had their weapons in the form of mini guns and had them pointed right at the five shadow men.

"Dakota, tell them to stand down!" shouted one of the Shadow Men.

"Fuck you," I said, manifesting an Ashtarian into my hands in the same forms as my alter egos.

All at once, my Hunters and I opened fire on the five shadow men. We watched as chunks of wood and streams of lead tore all five of the apart, killing each one instantly. Once we felt that the Illuminati Council had taken enough, we each turned to face each other.

"It is about time you bozos got here," I grunted.

"Don't you yell at us lover boy," shouted Shadow, "We were getting

reinforcements to get you the hell out of here."

"Alright, so where were you?" I asked.

"Hell," answered Shadow.

"Valhalla," answered Light.

Rumblings on the outside of the building made us all nervous. The growls of beasts and the screams of direct energy weapons crawled against our bones, the battle was in full force.

"Let's just say, our world is not the only one at war," grunted Shadow Hunter, "Better get changed."

"Kinda hard to get changed into my uniform, since it was filled with more holes than heads in Congress," I said.

"Just focus on the Ashtarian," suggested Light Hunter.

As the rumblings grew louder, I utilized the Ashtarian to build a metallic uniform around my body that matched the ones worn by the Hunters. The metallic coating protected me from debris caused by three loud explosions. The explosives were rigged to bust holes through the council's walls. Through the smoke and ash, I could see that the attackers were humanoid in stature. Many of them resembled human, animal hybrids ranted about by conspiracy theories. Some were demons, others resembled angels.

"Are those the reinforcements?" I asked.

"Nope," both Hunters said.

"I guess we better get to work," I suggested.

The Hunters and I shifted our weapons into forms that were easier to carry. Light summoned two samurai swords. I grew two automatic shotguns from my hands. Shadow rose two copies of Thor's Hammer and shot lightning all around us. We stood our ground, waiting for the next move to be made. For only a few moments, the armies that surrounded us stood still as if they were evaluating whether or not we stood as a threat. The silence grew inside what remained of the walls. The only sounds we could hear were our own beating hearts, and the cries of the wounded in the distances.

One of the creatures that breached the wall cried out, signaling to its comrades that it was time to attack. When their claws and swords started to reach for our flesh, that was when we knew it was time to retaliate and make our way outward. We had no plan, nor did we have an army to aid us. In the beginning, I only had two that stayed at my side throughout the fight. The war became so great, so chaotic, that no one could tell what was happening. There was only one way anyone could tell who their allies were, and that was to stick close to those who would be willing to plaster their own backs against yours. Everyone and everything else we saw was a potential enemy.

Each day that passed felt like a decade of bloodshed. Once I was finally freed from the prison, I did everything in my power to find my way home. I

almost had no sense of direction because of the chaos, so I started moving in the direction I felt psychically drawn to. It took every inch of my strength and energy to keep from dying from the wounds I received from sneaky bullets to the claws of creatures from other worlds. During my travels, I took refuge in abandoned homes and buildings I knew would have some sort of food and medical supplies. However, some parts of me wonder if the places I took refuge in were a part of the world I was born in.

When the armies of both sides started to swarm the planet, a countless number of portals were revealed. For what we could tell, the portals actually lead to other worlds. It wasn't even much of a stretch to assume that the portals lead to different periods of time. I cannot tell how many times I have gone from fighting some demonic being, only to find myself taking shelter from swarms of arrows in ancient Greece. Somehow, at least to the best of my knowledge, I managed to find a way back to my home world as it was still in the midst of chaos.

Once I had spent about two months fighting, I finally managed to meet up with Ashtar Command. Ashtar, himself, provided me with knowledge about the war as he sent the goddess Athena, to rally up reinforcements for our army. At no surprise to me, the first bunch to respond were the Aesir, the gods of Asgard.

This war was not the cliché good versus evil, it was far from it. This war was one to dictate a new world order. It was one of few battles where angels sided with demons. The missing beings from the various realms had all united together and became the invaders responsible for many conflicts throughout history. The Pings that supposedly caused the violent behavior, were indeed special beacons meant to signal to the resisting forces outside of planet that humanity would once again need their help.

Many goals were set by the leaders of the various groups Ashtar helped organize, most of which included finding ways to help those who weren't able to fight and to find some way to communicate with other people all over the globe. The main reason behind the war was that the leaders on both sides saw that the human race was in a very fragile state because it was on the verge of making an evolutionary leap. The armies gathered at Ashtar's side saw wanted to help humanity gather as one to lead a life of advancements that helped all in existence. Their ideals meant that as a whole, we were able to create a world where anything could be helpful to everything. A world where fancy gadgets and gizmos didn't come at the loss of beautiful scenery and wildlife. A world where everything was taken into consideration about how to improve the overall quality of life. A world where no knowledge was ever hidden away. A world that was prepared to take on anything that could damage the foundation of its creation.

The opposing army, ruled under a deity no one was able to identify, wanted to lead humanity into blind slavery and experimentation. They wanted humans to become nothing more than obedient lab rats who would pay no attention to what was really going on around them. A world where the darkness

that tried to hide away people like me, Shandra, Jessica, Brianna, Marcus, Micasia, June, every sexually assaulted child, every beaten housewife, every bloody and bruised body, the Jane and John Does who mysteriously died, every drug addict, every alcoholic, every neglected animal and every other misfortune became several shades darker. A world like our own, but without the brave good Samaritans and without the various things to distract the unsuspecting public from the truth.

As each day passed my connections with the Ashtar Command and the Aesir allowed for those who joined my side in the battle to gain a greater understanding of how the portals work. We all tried to send the knowledge and documentation of the things we saw to other worlds, other universes, in hopes of changing the course of history. We knew that there was a chance other realities would manifest similar events, and we wanted to take the opportunity to allow for the inhabitants to get ideas based on the knowledge we gained on how to combat the struggles. If the worlds we managed to establish contact with didn't experience the same fates we did, it would at least give them ideas as to where they can find answers many spend their entire lives trying to find.

And to help find those answers for ourselves, and to document the events of the war the Ashtar Command and their allies helped establish several sanctuaries for people who were lucky enough to survive. Here is where many of us, including myself As the days went on, I grew tired of fighting and took the opportunity to watch over the sanctuary that was established out of what remained of Murtaugh.

I did everything I could to gather survivors and lead them to shelter in Murtaugh. By some twist of fate; I was able to find June, Jessica, Marcus, and Micasia in the process. I tried everything I could to keep them safe. All of them even took whatever weapons they could find in order to stand their ground. But out of the surviving members of the Paranormal Raider Force, only Jessica and I managed to make it to the sanctuary. It has seemed that only those capable of channeling the strength of the demons they fought in their lives were the ones who were able to survive the longest. That and in the final push for the sanctuary, we were helped by a legion of Valkyries who took the time to slaughter our opponents.

Jessica and I took shelter in my grandparent's house, which somehow seemed unaffected by the war. My family was gone, and a majority of their belongings were gone as well. Part of me hoped that in some way, they were able to find shelter of their own. But as each day passed, in every moment that I was somehow able to squeeze in a thought that had nothing to do with the battle, I have come to accept the possibility that they have all passed away.

And now, on this surprisingly calm Sunday, I have the chance to let the world hear my thoughts. Not just our world, but every world that was part of the battle. I am still sorting through everything that happened, just trying to find out what happened. The world was still too chaotic to find out the names of the enemy. Plus it was only a matter of days before the winter came around and it nearly freezes everything in sight. Unseen forces had been governing the actions

of many who were involved in the war, but the winter proved to be one of the biggest tests.

Today's date is October 26, 2014, and I am finally able to finish writing this book. If you have taken the time to read the contents of these pages, I urge you to please be on the lookout for similar books that detail what happened. There is a good chance that the writers may know something about the war that I am completely unaware of. As I am writing these last few words, Jessica is by my side helping me keep focus simply because I am finally able to finish what I had to say. This book took me a lot of time to write, mostly because the story itself is still happening. In fact, I hear the cries of the Valkyries just above the roof of my grandparent's house, signaling that they are about to strike. There is a good chance that I may be needed for this fight, so I am going to leave the rest to Jessica.

Umm... hi. My name is Jessica Summers, Dakota just asked me to finish up this book so he could check out what was going on with the screaming outside. I was given the orders to write down everything that is going on just in case it has something to do with what Dakota has already talked about.

I am just taking a peek outside, we were both sitting by the kitchen cabinet when we heard the screaming come from the sky. In the middle of the yard, there is some sort of angel standing with a golden sword in hand. This angel doesn't look anything like what is shown in old paintings. It was dressed in golden armor and the wings even glowed. I tried to get a look into its eyes. I keep getting the feeling that I recognize the angel. I can't put a name to it, especially because I didn't know anyone with the long gorgeous red hair the angel had.

Dakota is standing about four feet away from the being, and the look on his face shows that he is in shock. I wonder if... oh my god. The angel-thing just took off her mask! I know why I recognized it. The angel is SHANDRA!

I can see tears on Dakota's face, but I can't hear what he is saying to her. He is slowly walking closer to Shandra, reaching his arms out like he is trying to give her a hug.

Oh no, this can't be happening. How is this possible?! I thought she...

SHANDRA JUST STABBED DAKOTA WITH HER SWORD!

Bound in Beijing

PROOF

My eyes burn from the sunlight dancing off the white embodiment of the room... too much to handle. I don't remember how I got here. I don't remember who I am. I don't know where I am. My ears won't stop ringing. My body feels like the Earth is trying to bury me within its skin. Everything looks blurry. Something must've happened to me. I don't know what, but it must've been horrible.

I sit up in a bed with sheets and fabrics made of plastic. A thin cloth was strapped over my body and tied behind my neck and waist. The skin on my back and ass is exposed. My sight slowly became better, revealing more about the room around me. Machines of various types stood all around me. After a couple minutes had passed, I could tell I was in the hospital. Time started to feel as if it was being dragged by thousands of meth-fed mice. Everything felt so rushed. Hours seem to jump by in seconds. The world seems to spin out of control. Was the world spinning faster because of what I did, and was that action the reason I was here?

My thoughts became interrupted as a blonde woman comes into the room. She wasn't dressed in the usual hospital scrubs a nurse would wear while working. Instead, she is dressed in a white tank top that barely covered her stomach, tight denim jeans, and a leather jacket with pink stitching. She walks in eating a turkey sandwich that looked like it came from a vending machine, paying me no attention as if I wasn't in the room. I clear my throat to get her attention, causing her to jump and scream as if she saw a ghost. She scans me as her mouth slams shut by the push of her palms. Bits of her sandwich fall to her bright blue tennis shoes. Something inside me tells me I know this girl, and that I should avoid making any... “moves”.

“Oh. My. God... Kevin?” she whispers.

“I'm sorry,” I reply, “Do I know you?”

“It's me, Rachel, your sister,” she answers, “Don't you remember me?”

“No, sorry. Everything is a blur.”

Rachel places the bottoms of her hands against the tops of her eye sockets as she took a deep breath. Her entire body seems to pulsate as she tries her best to think of a way to approach me. Her hands slip down to cover her lips as her eyes sealed shut. Gears in her mind started to turn.

“You really don't remember anything that happened?” she asks.

“No, I don't remember anything. What is going on?” I ask.

“Have you seen the news?”

“No, I just woke up. What the hell happened?!”

Rachel hurries over the television hanging from the wall to turn it on. A commercial for some movie, called “Death Is Not The End,” was already playing, showing that it was due to release on April 28th. It didn't last long and immediately lead into a news reel depicting a horrific plane crash. A man and woman dressed in suits appear as they got ready for the broadcast.

“And now for new updates on last month's horrific plane crash,” says the male news anchor, “We've recently received an update from St. Andrew's hospital and the families of the victims involved, that two more people out of the nine survivors from the Zeta Airlines Flight 331 crash have passed away. As you may recall, all nine of the survivors recovered from the wreckage was reported to be in critical condition, five were in comas as they were all rushed to the hospital. The remaining two survivors, Kevin and Angelica Roberts, are reported to be in stable condition, though doctors are unsure when they will awaken.”

The screen fades into a series of photos that look like they were depicting what had happened to me. The first photo shows a group of people, all smiling as they stood huddled together on a gigantic stone walk. Beyond them stood several other people, taking photos of the jungle-like scenery all around them. It all looked so familiar, yet I couldn't tell in what way. A man who looked a lot like me stood in the middle of the group with his arm around a woman with long red hair. Out of everyone in the group, those two looked like they were the closest. A man's voice appears out of nowhere to narrate.

“Happy, enjoying a trip in a foreign land, and the two in pictured in the middle? In love. These are only a couple words to describe the emotions the nine survivors felt before the tragic day,” the narrator said, “Before this trip, they barely knew each other and, according to family members, they become as close as they could be.”

A collage of individual photos of the nine people slides into view. The second, the photos would stop in place, the man would read off a name.

“Bertha Harris, Jake Farmers, Jason Martinez, Maya Lee, Stephen James, Luke Thomas, and Kevin and Angelina Roberts were all on their way home from a tour of China only to be met with...”

Rachel flinches and ends up shutting off the television. Her eyes clench as she tries to keep herself from crying. Something about my face must've indicated I was upset at her actions since she immediately starts shaking her head in sorrow. I stretch my arm out to signal to her to come closer, so I could give her a hug. Seeing Rachel like that felt heartbreaking, even though I don't really feel like I knew her at all.

“I'm sorry. It was just too hard to watch it the first time it happened,” she says.

“It's okay. Just, please, tell me what happened before we get interrupted by someone. I have the feeling there is going to be a mad rush once they realize I'm awake,” I responded.

“Yeah, you're probably right.”

Rachel sits down next to me on the hospital bed, avoiding all of the wires and tubes attached to me. She takes a couple moments to wipe her eyes and clear her throat before she started trying to explain all that had happened.

“Um... well,” she sighs, “I'm not exactly sure where to start but like the

news said, you are married. Your wife's name, at least before she took our last name, was Angelica Weeks. You two met at a suicide awareness charity event in Spokane, about four years ago. You two happened to start talking and apparently hit it off very quickly. Two years later, you two got married and started going on trips to all sorts of places when you got the chance. Most recently, you two went on a week long tour of China and apparently, from what we could tell based on the texts you sent us and the photos we found on your phone, you guys were having a very good time."

"Sounds like I just hit a sucky way to end a good trip."

Rachel giggles at my little joke about what was happening. I guess my humor was something frequent and a quality she missed.

"Yeah, you're going to be fine," Rachel giggles.

A couple knocks on the door catch our attention and interrupt our meeting. The door slowly creaks open when Rachel and I jump at the sound. A slender, almost brittle looking hand slowly props open the door as a little old woman pokes her head inside. At first, she seemed tired and was just wanting to go home, but the second she locks her eyes on me she jumped and caught her second wind.

"Oh dear, Mr. Roberts, you're finally awake! How long have you been awake?!" she nearly screams.

"Uh, he has been awake for about five minutes. I walked in and he was sitting upright and talking," Rachel explains.

"Oh, great! That is good. Now, Mr. Roberts how are you feeling?"

"Well," I tell her, "I feel a little nauseous and I don't remember anything before I woke up. You all calling me Keith Roberts, feels weird."

"You've been having amnesia? The doctor said because of your scans that was a likely possibility but thankfully you've shown improvements," the nurse explains, "But aside from what you've told me so far, is there anything else?"

"No, not that I've noticed. I could use something to eat though."

Rachel reaches her arms over my shoulders and gives me a tight squeeze. She looks straight at the nurse ready to find out more about my condition. I feel the sense of worry which radiated from her heart like a burning flame. It is nice to know someone was looking out for me in this confusing time.

"Well, the fact you are upright and verbal does show some promise. In most cases, coma patients wake up weak and tired, so hopefully, everything goes well. I'm going get the doctor in here so we can make sure you'll be okay. Just hold out, okay?" the nurse says.

"Okay, I'll get him something to drink. Just hurry, just in case," Rachel says.

The nurse hurries out of the room. For such a little old woman, she had

a lot of strength. She looked like she was sixty plus years old, but in a very decent state of health for her age. Of course, seeing someone like me practically rise from an impending grave would give anybody a good boost of energy.

"For an old gal, she moves pretty well," I joked.

"Yeah, hopefully, she keeps everything calm because there are a lot of people who want to talk to you about what happened on the plane," Rachel said.

"Not like I'll be much use, to be honest."

"It's alright, Keith, no one was really expecting you to be this well."

My head starts to feel like a cat is tearing up the insides of my brain as the sound of an airplane taking off in the distance echoes quietly in the air. My entire body starts to shake as flashes appear in my eyes. Images were appearing out of nowhere. I could hear screaming, the rushing air, an explosion, and the cracks of bones. My entire body seemed to teleport from the hospital and onto a plane that was crashing.

Was I going back?

"Keith!" a woman shouted, "We're going to die!"

Without control of my body, I turned to my right to find a gorgeous woman. It was the woman the news was claiming to be my wife. If she was... then how in the HELL did I manage to marry this goddess?!

A gorgeous blonde, with long sexy legs and a smoking hot body. Past the tears bubbling in her eyes and her crunched face was precious, almost holy, blue eyes that seemed to sparkle. A longing for the feel of her skin pressed against mine overcame me as I reached over to her to pull her in close. Oxygen masks dropped in front of us and everyone else that wasn't on a damaged part of the plane. All of us were too scared to move.

"Ang... Angelica, we're going to make it!" I screamed, "Just hold on! Don't you stop fighting!"

"I can't. I can't keep going like this. Just..." she cried.

"I'm going to be here, for you, no matter what. I've promised you that and I am going to keep it. Even if this damn plane lands in the middle of the ocean, I'll be there for you to pull you out of the deepest trench."

She nodded her head and gave a small smile before giving me a gentle kiss. The memory flash disappeared the millisecond before Angelica's lips touched mine. It felt like I was being tortured by some sort of mystical force. I moaned as my body shifts back into the hospital room. Though the sound of my voice sounds like a mere whisper to me, it must've sounded like the screams of a thousand burning souls since Rachel rushes to grab onto my body.

"Keith, are you okay?" she panics.

"The... plane..." I continue to moan, "Something hit the plane."

"Wait... you remember?!"

"Bits are slowly coming back to me. But if it just took the sound of a plane landing to trigger it, then I'd hate to see... what it takes to get everything else."

I can barely focus as the pain from the memory crashing back into my mind continues to linger. My mind was trying to piece together what had happened to put me in this situation but quickly got frustrated. Suddenly I feel a small shock wave from the wooden door the nurse left from, she came back with a tall Italian looking male with a stethoscope around his neck. He looks a bit out of breath like he ran across the entire country to meet me.

"Mr. Roberts, I'm... Dr. Antonino," he nearly wheezes, "I've been monitoring you since you first were admitted into this hospital. How are you feeling?"

Slight nausea filled my head before I could speak. The moment I tried to open my mouth to say something, it felt like I was about to vomit. Both Rachel and the nurse noticed this and got ready to fill in my place for the conversation.

"He says he's feeling a bit of nausea, and that he can't remember anything from before the accident," the nurse recalls, "According to Rachel, he's only been up for roughly 15 minutes now."

"Thank you, Karen," Dr. Antonino says, "From the looks of things the nausea is getting worse. Has something happened?"

"Yeah, it was weird," Rachel answers, "A plane was descending and he started acting like he was getting a severe migraine. He's acting like bits and pieces are starting to come back to him."

"Really? That's great! That means the injuries weren't as bad as we thought!" Antonino says to try and lighten the mood, "Maybe you can help shed some light on what brought the plane down?"

"It was shot down. By what I don't know," I reply.

"Really? The news reports aren't indicating anything about the plane being shot down. The reports keep saying that it is believed to be an engine failure that caused the crash," the nurse said.

"Unless the engine had several tons of dynamite inside of it, the mess was too large for a simple engine problem."

"Well, if you're up for it, can you tell us about what you remember so far?" Rachel asks.

"Yes, Keith, please tell us anything you can remember. There are a lot of people that want to know what happened," the doctor insists.

I take a few breaths before speaking to try to clear myself up from remaining nausea. I close my eyes to focus on the images that just flashed before me, just to see if there was any detail I may have missed. So much was happening in so little of time, it is all just overwhelming. Tears start to spill from my eyes as if they were trying to release the pain my mind hid from me just to

make it easier to recall the events that took place. I shake my head to let them know I was willing to talk.

"Okay," the doctor responds, "Before you begin, do you mind if I record you on video so we can get the information you provide to the authorities?"

"Why?" Rachel asks.

"Well, I hate to sound negative but, when someone wakes up from a coma, the next 24 to 48 hours is often a crucial time since it is not uncommon for the patient to wake up only to die later. Many believe it is a higher power giving the person a chance to say goodbye to their loved ones," Dr. Antonino explains.

Rachel starts to cry at the idea of my death but held herself together pretty well just so she would hear out the rest of what the doctor had to say.

"So, before we get started, what are Keith's chances of making it?" Rachel asked.

"Well, it is difficult to say given the nature of this incident. But since the damage has shown improvements over the time he was unconscious, his chances are pretty good. However, it is still best to just keep him around for observation for a couple days just to make sure."

"Alright. That's good," Rachel laughed.

My sister started to repeat the phrase, "He'll make it," over and over again under her breath as if she was doing a magical chant to keep me alive. I didn't say anything since she was doing all she could not to burst down into tears.

"And I'd just like to say that recording you was a suggestion given to me by the police, so just in case your condition did take a turn for the worst, a part of you would still be able to shed some light on what happened," Dr. Antonino adds.

"Okay," I whisper, "That is a good idea. Go ahead and record me."

"Thanks. Ready to be a part of history?"

I took a couple more deep breaths to seal away my tears but was not successful. I feel a part of my mind start panicking hysterically, trying to convince the rest of my body to make a leap out of the window. My mind then feels like it is splitting into two.

"Yeah," I answer, "I'm ready."

"Good, you're doing a very noble thing."

The doctor pulls out a small blue digital camera from his coat pocket and turns it on. Digitized bells followed by a series of beeps seem to scream as he adjusts the settings to get the device to start recording video. He presses a button on the top of the camera, which turns on a flashy red light. Both he and the nurse move over to the counter on the other side of the room to give the

camera a clear shot of me.

"Before we get started, can you tell me your name," Dr. Antonino said like he is reading a script.

"Keith Anderson," I said.

"Alright, Keith. Can you tell me your age?"

"No."

"Can you tell me, where you were born?"

"No."

"Do you know where you are at?"

"St. Andrews hospital, at least according to the news."

"Good, that is correct. Do you know what city this hospital is in?"

"Judging by the rain, I'm guessing near Seattle."

Antonino and Karen laugh slightly at my joke. Even Rachel breaks a smile through her tears.

"Correct. Now, do you know what today's date is?" Karen asks.

"My best guess is before April 28th," I answer, "My sister, Rachel, turned on the TV to show me the news and a movie trailer happened to be playing."

Rachel hurried over to a bench near the window to pick up a newspaper.

"This is today's paper, Keith," she whispers while handing the paper to me.

I glance at the front page to find today's date. The top of the new paper shows me the current date was April 17, 2011. The front page is nearly filled with a photo someone took of the plane as it was coming down.

"Well, apparently today is the 17th," I say while turning the paper to face the camera.

"Good idea," the doctor whispers, "Something tells me a lot of people will challenge this."

"Now Keith, you said that you saw the news," Karen adds, "So are you aware of why you are here?"

"It is starting to look like I survived a very nasty plane crash," I answer.

"Before we started recording, you mentioned that even you are experiencing a bit of amnesia, bits of what happened on the plane started to come back to you," the doctor chimes in.

"Yes, that is correct."

"So can you tell us what you remember?" Dr. Antonino asks, "Go ahead and take your time, maybe if you allow yourself to relax more will come

to you."

My eyes close themselves shut to replay the images from the crash. Immediately I notice more details from the flight, like the others who traveled with me and my wife. We were all spread throughout the plane but were lucky enough to be arranged away from the blast. Angelica and I were the closest.

"The first thing I remember is the sound of the rushing wind coming in through a gigantic hole in the side of the plane. Blood and pieces of burned skin and clothes were everywhere. The wind rushing around us sucked the air out of our lungs, making it nearly impossible to scream.

"My wife, Angelica, and I were sitting behind the wing, just across from where the plane was hit. I don't know why we were alive. I don't know what hit the plane or when. I don't know who's blood painted our skin, or who's skin grazed my cheek as it flew through the air. I remember a woman trying to attend to her child, whose cries were too quiet to really cause any problems for the rest of us."

"Keep going, Keith," Rachel whispers to encourage me.

More images of Angelica flash before my eyes. They seem... random, showing different pieces from our time together. Seeing her over and over again forces more tears to spill from my eyes. My lungs stiffen inside my chest making it hard to breathe. My throat panics when the one pathway it needs became blocked, triggering faster and harder bursts of air to travel into my lungs. No matter what I try, I can't break free. A phantom hand appears in front my face and starts to brush against my neck. The hand moves slowly back and forth with a soft, warm, and calming touch. The hand felt like that of a woman, one who knew me very well.

"Keith... I'm pregnant," whispers a phantom voice.

My eyes jump out, nearly panicking.

"Di... did you just say something, Rachel" I ask.

Her body shifts backward as her eyebrow arches at the same rate of speed. Am I going insane?

"No, Keith," she says, "Why?"

"Keith... It's okay..." the phantom whispers, "The baby and I are fine. Come see us."

I start to panic. Voices in my head started taunting me, seemingly portraying a woman I love but barely remember! Why was this happening to me? What did I do to deserve this?!

"Where?!" I scream, "Where are you two? I want to see you!"

Dr. Antonino and Karen the Nurse try their best to keep their jaws from falling through the floor. I start to hear every heartbeat in the hospital catching up with mine, as mine start to beat faster than the wings of a hummingbird.

"Mr. Anders...son, please... try to relax," Karen stutters.

“Keith, what is going on?” Rachel asks, “Doctor, do you know?”

“No, but we better keep our guard up. He is about to get a bit aggressive,” the doctor warns.

“Breath,” the phantom woman adds, “Room 1305. I'll show you the way...”

Phantom lips and phantom eyes manifest from nothing and linger near my eyes. I start to feel the air dance in such a smooth grace another flash of images appears to the tune of the Phantom's welcoming hum. The same face, now with a beautiful body wrapped in a long white dress, was pressing her head against my chest as we carefully spun on top of a world that seemed all our own.

Music was playing in the background, but all I could hear was our beating heart creating a field around our world to protect us from anything the cosmos tried to throw at us.

“I wish you and I could stay like this,” Angelica whispered.

“We will,” I told her, “Seeing you, in this moment, will be what I see in you even when we are eighty and losing track of things in our own hands.”

“You already do that!” she joked.

My cheeks burned red and my head rested on the top of Angelica as our bodies continued to dance without a care for the millions of eyes that followed our moves, like stars dancing in the heavens. My sight returns to the phantom woman manifesting in front of me. It was indeed, my wife coming to see me.

“Do you remember me now?” she asks me.

“How could I ever forget my wife?” I answer.

The same smile I fell in love with appears on Angelica's ghostly face as the rest of her body takes shape. Her, I guess spirit, has on the same clothes I remembered seeing her in from the plane crash. God, even after literally falling from the sky, she still looked amazing.

“I knew you were better than the doctor thought,” the phantom jokes.

My attention shifts from my phantom wife to the other people in the room as I realize their jaws and eyes would need to be cleaned off of the floor. It is safe to say I wasn't the only one who could see Angelica.

“How is this possible?” Rachel asks.

“To be honest, I don't know,” Angelica answers, “It just sorta happened. There are others in the building, but none of them still have a body to call home. Maybe that teenage ghost hunter you've been following online will have some sort of idea.”

Dr. Antonino starts to quietly walk over to me to start unhooking some of the tubes and wires from my body. The entire time it takes him to mess with the machines, he studies Angelica's form just to understand a bit more about how it was possible.

“I think you should listen to your wife,” he says, “You should go see her.”

“Before we go, Doctor,” Angelica adds, “I am okay if you keep filming. If this goes like I think it is, we might just change history.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” the nurse adds.

Right as the last wire is taken off of my body, leaving online a PICC line running into the fold of my arm, I stood up from the hospital bed. The second my feet touch the floor, phantom Angelica disappears without any further say.

“Let's keep going,” Rachel suggests.

“Yeah, something tells me you're not the only one going to wake up,” Dr. Antonino adds.

All three of the other people in the room swarm to my side in order to help me stand. My entire body still feels weak, making it so I can barely move. Every part of my body moans in agony as lazy muscles are being forced to function. My mind keeps forcing what it could so it could help me do what needed to be done. I need to see my wife, I have to know if she is okay. Seeing her in that... form I guess you could call it was too confusing and I needed to know the truth.

Karen the nurse jogs over to the door and holds it open so I could emerge into the hospital corridor. Every eye quickly draws itself to my movement as every body holds still in shock. Everyone knew who I was, they knew I was there, they didn't know I was back into the real world. With each weak step I take, my audience succumbs deeper into silence. Everyone's hearts beat synchronizes into one loud explosion after another. My feet feel so weak, the vibrations from the explosions shake my entire body, as if in an attempt to knock me dead.

My room is 1335, I didn't know that till I happened to glance around the outside hallway. My wife and I were on the same floor, we were close. As I move further down the hallway, I start to feel something tugging at my heart...something that feels stronger with each step.

After what seemed like hours, I finally find a door with the room number my wife's spirit told me to visit. My heart begins to beat in a song discovery, to commemorate the finding of an ancient artifact many seemed to hold dear. Rachel hurried in front of me so she could hold the door open and see for herself what was about to happen. As soon as the door creaks open, a sleeping beauty is unveiled before me. The same phantom woman, the same woman from my flashbacks, was now right in front of me. Her body looks weak, and her skin looks pale. She looks so sick, yet she was becoming a glowing beacon of hope for everyone.

“Go see her, Keith,” Dr. Antonino whispers, “She is your wife after all.”

Rachel helps me over to Angelica's bedside and pulls a chair over so I could sit down next to her. My muscles ache as they slide my body into a chair with an awfully thin cushion. I just sit and stare at my wife, as if I was trying to dig inside her mind. One idea keeps popping into my head to wake her up. I'm desperate to know more, so I slowly reached for Angelica's hand and lifted it. I lean forward, to give her hand a kiss just above the knuckles. Out of the tops of my eyes, I notice two familiar green specs emerge from gray slivers of skin. Angelica is waking up!

"It is just like the day we first met," she whispers, "Remember?"

"I do," I answer, "We were both nine and you crashed your bike into an old ash tree. I happened to be walking by, and I hurried over to help."

"Wait, you guys knew each other longer? How?" my sister asks.

My mind starts to shift back in time again, to revisit the time I first met the woman my soul was bound to. The sound of a young girl crying in the distance overtakes everything else around me. I close my eyes for a moment, to open them into a different time. The worlds looked much larger, and my body felt smaller. When I hear the girl screaming, I immediately bolt in the direction I hear it coming from.

I see a bright pink handlebar tossed on its side, quickly appearing from behind the bark of an old tree and a girl with bright clothing crying lying on top of it. I hurry even quicker to try to help her out.

"Daddy!" she keeps crying, "Mommy!"

"Hey, are you alright?" I ask.

"No, it hurts!" the girl continues to cry.

I reach my hand out to help her stand up. Just underneath the shades of her shorts, a couple almost black bruises act like they were trying to squeeze her legs, making the pain even worse. She had a couple scrapes on her arms, which barely let out any blood. I could tell she wasn't hurt too badly, but she still needed a little help.

"Here, grab my hand," I say to her.

Her cries settle just long enough for her to see my gesture and reach her hand out. As I reached down further to grab her hand, I felt tiny slices of skin start to tickle my palm. I slowly adjust my weight backward to help the girl stand up and smile once she was somewhat able to hold herself.

"Thanks," she said.

"No problemo," I reply, "That looked like it hurt and you could use some help feeling better."

"Yeah it did hurt," she smiles.

"Anyway, my name is Keith. I don't remember seeing you around here, before."

"I'm Angelica, my family and I just moved in yesterday because of my

dad's job and I was riding my bike to look around at the neighborhood to see if there were any other kids I could play with."

"Well, as far as I know, there are only five kids here. There is me and my sister Rachel, who is two years younger than me, our twin friends Donnie and Ronnie, and now you!"

"Cool, I hope we can play together some time."

Young Angelica turns and limps to look at her bike to see the damage, "Good, my bike is okay." She takes one step and immediately bends overs because of a searing pain in her foot.

"Owie!! Ow! Ow!" Angelica screams.

"It looks like your foot may be hurt, let me carry you. Where is your house?" I ask.

"The big blue one with the fountain, about six houses down the street," Angelica answers.

"Okay, I'll carry you. Get on my back," I said.

My vision quickly adjusts back into the present moment. My wife appears back into my sight, still weak from our horror, but her smile glowing like an eternal flame.

"I'm glad you still remember," Angelica moans.

"How could I forget? You were my best friend back then. I was so sad when you moved," I told her.

"The FBI is kinda greedy," she joked, "But it must've been fate we met again at that charity event."

Before I could speak, the muffled sounds of gunshots send shivers through the air. Angelica's eyes grew seven times their original size. I turn my head to see what was going on, to find both the nurse and Rachel lying on the floor. Blobs of dark red quickly grew from their chests and foreheads.

"Ford, they're awake," Dr. Antinino says into his cell phone while holding a smoking, silenced pistol, "The witnesses are dead."

"Good," says a male voice on the phone, "Prepare the other two for shipment."

"What the FUCK is going on?!" I scream.

"An evil long unknown since the dawns of gods on earth, who saw to the divisions of divinity, will reemerge from lands known to the masses of a world from long ago preserved within the very sands of time to finish his plans," the doctor chants, "He goes only by the names which hint the disappearance of light. Few within his reach shall know of his purpose and his power while all drive themselves to wars, unlike history, has ever seen. In this distraction, he sets his fortunes and power into creation without interference.

"But seeds he sowed in the ancient past come brewing into incarnates,

and with time their powers of same shall emerge in time to face their father. The sons shall emerge in four and be blessed with wives with powers of their own.

"The first son: a man bound to his wife in the capital of a nation with history that counters the rest of the world. His powers to shelter his soul from wounds so great they may only be earned from falling in the sky will emerge as he and his wife are threatened after doing so. With better control of his strengths, he is able to better hide than his brothers.

"The second son: a man who stares in shadow with an eye that holds a storm, will gather eight souls to join him as he walks the night making a power of eleven. His team will comprise of One, a giant with a soul of light and dark. One, a wounded warrior of the past. One, the daughter not bound to time. Two sisters soaked in loss and blood. One, child of the stars. The man will be cursed with powers to alter space in times that seem most powerful in tones of rage and knowledge that grows the instant a new threat emerges. He can control what he his but prefers to let his powers run free, ultimately leading to destruction and discovery in brutality

"The third son: one with nature in his heart, knowledgeable of the hidden treasures already bestowed upon the world. In time he will aid one of his forgotten brothers to aid the daughter not bound to time. His powers emerged in methods tied to his loves for nature.

"The fourth son: none is known but all that hear his whispers are afraid. It is believed he is the strongest and his father's favored son.

"Many feats will unite the brothers to a fate, not even Death can interfere. Many will aid in the fight and powers only rumored to alter time will become weapons of ultimate desolation. The best of prophets say time itself blocks their vision of what is coming, since time itself is altered. But in such, one remains true, that the sons will turn on father to unite a new Earth for all of creation."

"What the hell does that mean?!" I scream trying to summon my strength.

"For the first born son of Eliminos Ra, you suck at hiding," he says while drawing out a strange metallic weapon.

The next thing I see is a bright blue strike of lightning cutting into my wife and I's flesh, knocking us both unconscious.

As I awake, strapped to a cold steel table by thick metal braces crushing against my wrists and ankles. As my eyes opened, I could tell Angelica, was in the next... plastic cell, still unconscious.

Lover's Cry

PROOF

Chapter 17
Olivia

It seems like forever since the last time anyone was able to enjoy some peace and quiet around here. The war is still raging on all over the planet, but the army I served with managed to push back the invaders far enough away from here that people can rebuild their lives. I should know, considering in the time that has passed I married the man who saved my life several times and we even had a beautiful ten-month-old daughter together.

For those of you who read my husband's books, you might already have an idea about what I am talking about. But the truth is, my husband didn't cover everything that happened. In fact, I am pretty sure that many of you are a bit confused about how I am even able to tell my story, considering how things ended last time you heard about me. Hopefully, for those of you who have paid attention, I will be able to sort through the chaos as many of us are still trying to do. Because the truth is, there are many things that my husband didn't mention in his book that make the truth about the Paranormal Raider Force and the war much darker than anyone ever realized. So within these pages, I hope to continue the trend, started by my husband, and reveal some secrets of my own that I kept away from the people I was closest to; so here goes.

For those of you who haven't figured it out yet, my name is Shandra Frandsen, even though for the majority (if not all) of this story I had yet to be married and was still hanging on to my maiden name of Ford. My husband, Dakota Frandsen, was the founder and leader of a paranormal investigation team known as the Paranormal Raider Force. I honestly thought that I would never be a part of the things that Dakota showed me in the eight years we have been together. Dakota came to me in a time I needed an escape from a dangerous home, one that almost killed me on various occasions.

My husband may have already shed some light on our time together, but he never really knew all of the details about what happened. I didn't want to keep these secrets from him, or from anyone for that matter, I was just too afraid. There was so much I could tell about the times my head would be smashed against the kitchen cabinet or my nose would be busted open because I was stupid and tried to block my stepfather's punches. But I am getting ahead of myself.

My story begins when I was about nine years old when I was just in the third grade. I had just come home from school when I finally heard the news. News that I never wanted to hear. I remember that I was sitting at my desk doing homework when I heard a knock at the front door. I listened as my mom, Ramona, answered the door. It wasn't long before I could tell I was needed after I heard her start crying. We lived in a two story house at the time in a quiet suburban neighborhood. The public library and the city park were right across the street, so any noise other than the sounds of children at play was unusual.

Hearing my mom cry like she did immediately informed me something was wrong. So I hurried downstairs to find out what was wrong. As my bare feet brushed against the carpet floor, I almost felt tiny hands hold me in place when I made it halfway through the staircase. I looked to the front door to find my mom talking with two guys dressed in Army Ceremonial attire. Her hands held a small triangle flag against her chest as she sank to her knees. The two guys tilted their hats in my direction and walked away as my mom continued to cry. I had no clue what was happening, but I wish I never asked. “Mom,” I said, “What is wrong?” She started to wipe her eyes as she gently turned her head to the side in order to hear me better. “Shandra, honey, can you come here for a second?” she asked.

As I walked down the stairs, I couldn't help but ask, “Am I in trouble?” My mom quietly laughed. “No, sweetie. Just please come here for a minute,” she answered. The front door stood wide open as I walked up behind my mom. I saw the army guys get into a black luxury sedan when I was finally right next to my mom so she could deliver the news.

“Hey,” she whispered, “Remember what I told you could happen to you dad when he left?”

“Yeah,” I answered. “Well, unfortunately, your dad won't be coming home.”

I felt my heart hit the floor. I remember praying every night by the picture of my dad and I, on his old fishing boat, that stood on the nightstand by my bed just to see my dad again. I loved it when I could sneak onto the computer to talk with him online at three o'clock in the morning, but I wanted to see him in person again.

“Why isn't he coming home? Did he get hurt?” I asked my mom.

“He did get hurt, very badly. Shandra, your dad has passed away,” my mom answered.

"What?"

"Daddy has died, sweetie."

My mom tried to hold back her crying long enough for her to be able to tell me what happened, but right as she confirmed what she said she lost it. I couldn't help but scream as loud as I could when my eyes started to water up. I just heard that my dad had died while he was away in Iraq. I never knew much about what he did over there, other than he monitored radars for potential air threats.

In my childish mind, I thought that he was one of the safest people over there. My mind couldn't wrap itself the horrors of what was happening, or around the horrible things that were about to happen. When I first heard the news about my father, my eyes closed themselves off from the world. When they opened, I found my mom squeezing my body. Just outside the house both of the Army guys were sitting in their car with their windows down, watching. One of them had an evil smirk on his face. I always had a bad feeling whenever I saw him, and it wasn't long before I found out why.

It took about a month in order to make the arrangements for my father's funeral. The official reports of the incident stated that his body was too damaged to be returned home so the military sent his belongings in a large box along with a condolence letter signed by everyone in his unit. In the place of his body, the casket would be lined with various items that all who attended knew he loved. Some people tossed in a few DVD copies of old western movies. A couple people added CD and cassette copies of old rock bands. My mom threw in a few letters she and my dad wrote to each other when they first started dating. Right on top of the pile, I set down a song that I was writing for him, for the day he came home, on the piano.

My mom taught me how to play when I was really little, and I became so in love with the sound that I nearly played every night. Sometimes I would play something for my dad while we video chatted, and every time I did he swore that I would become a great musician. After he died, I hardly ever played. It wasn't because I didn't want to play anymore, it was because I was afraid of the man who came into my life after the funeral. The fear and anger I felt towards him ruined the melody of the keys as my hands would move on their own to play. Greg Roland, the man my mom started dating shortly after my dad's funeral. He served in the same unit and was one of the men that showed up to deliver the news. I noticed that he and my mom became close very quickly.

At first, he seemed like a nice guy, in fact, I even became comfortable enough with him to call him my dad. But shortly after he and my mom got married, things became very violent very quickly. What started as an argument a week became a twenty-four-hour death match. Greg used to throw anything in his sight at my mom, from tables to knives. My piano was one of the first things broken beyond repair because of his rampages. Soon my mom wasn't enough of a punching bag for him, and he started coming after me.

When he thought that I lied about my homework, I was struck across

the face with a belt. When I would forget to take out the garbage, he would shove a cigarette into my clothes. When he first started to hit me, he made sure to only hit areas that would be covered up. Soon that wasn't enough for him. There would be nights that I would wake up in bed with my pajama pants and underwear missing. He would crawl into my bed, completely naked. I cannot count the times he held me down, nearly breaking my wrists as I tried to wiggle myself free. I tried to scream for help, but that only inspired him to tie his belt around my neck and squeeze until I would pass out, leaving him free to do as he wanted. Each morning after it happened, I could feel that something wasn't right "down there." I tried to tell my mom about what happened. I tried telling my teachers at school. I tried telling doctors, cops, even my friends at school but nobody would help me. When the cops did come, they immediately dismissed everything. That is when I finally had enough and tried to kill myself. But something, or rather someone, stopped me.

I tried to hang myself, on a night where I was home alone. My mom went out for dinner as part of Greg's abusive ritual. Whenever he felt "sorry," swearing that he would never do it again, he would treat my mom and me to fancy nights out. That night, I told him that I couldn't because I had to work on a research paper for school that I needed to finish. He tried to convince me to come along anyway, but Mom managed to get him to leave me alone. I didn't know why she did it, but I couldn't help but thankful that she was giving me the space I needed. I waited in my room until I knew my mother and my stepfather were driving away before I set up everything I needed.

The only way out that I saw, the only way I knew of where I wouldn't be dragged right back, was to simply hang myself. If I tried to run away, the police and social services would only put me back where it all started. And if that happened, the hell that son of a bitch put me and my mom through would only get worse. The only way out, that would maybe get my mom away from my stepfather, was for me to die. I threw some bed sheets tied together over a horizontal support beam in the far corner of my bedroom and fastened the end into a hangman's knot.

My dad (biological dad) showed me how to tie one during our fishing trips, and he also had me swear to him that I would never use it outside of fishing. Where I was mentally, I didn't even consider how my actual father would feel if he saw me like this. All I wanted was to be with him again and be far away from my step father. To hold my body up while I put the loop around my neck, I used an old chair I grabbed out from the dining room. I was too short to stand from the seat of the chair, so I tried my best to maintain my balance while standing on its back. When everything was set, my foot slipped and knocked back the chair before I was ready. I quickly started to choke, but soon I felt like I was floating.

The entire room quickly filled up with this bright blue light that blocked everything in the room. A man with long hair, dressed in a large white robe, appeared out of nowhere just a few feet in front of me. He had circular scars on both sides of his hands, which he extended to me. The palms of his

hands faced the sky, as his eyes stared directly into mine.

"Take my hands, child," he said. I put both of my hands into his and watched as two tiny golden birds perched themselves on my fingers. The man looked as amazed at the sight as I was.

"My dear child," he said, "You are going to be very special one day. Why are you trying to take that away from yourself?"

"Because I hate being hurt by my step-dad. I want to see my real dad again," I answered.

"Shandra, your real father isn't here! Doing what you are doing won't let you see him again."

I started to break down in tears.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because your father is still very much alive! Once you become the strong woman you are destined to become, you will see him again."

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"That is for you to discover. But since you did come all this way, there is someone here that would like to talk to you."

"Who?"

"Someone who you will meet again when the time is right."

"Huh?"

I was confused by what the man meant by what he said. If there was somebody with us that wanted to talk to me, but if I had to wait in order to meet them, then why did he even bring it up? I wanted to ask him about what he meant but, before I could get another word out, he dropped both of his arms and stepped to the side. Standing behind him was a little girl with long black hair. She looked to be about six years old and looked a lot like me. I watched as she lifted her hand and waved at me.

"Hi Mommy," she said.

"What?" I asked.

"I was wanting to see you!" she cheered.

"But I'm not your mom."

"Yes, you are. Well, at least not yet. I can't really explain]right now, but I wanted to tell you something."

"What is that?"

"Don't be afraid of the bad guys, you have powers that they are very afraid of. Don't be afraid to fight."

I couldn't help but pause as I noticed two golden wings burst from my back. I didn't feel any pain, but I did feel some sort of raw power surging through my body. It felt like an adrenaline rush but stronger. It felt like

something god-like.

"See, Mommy?" the little girl giggled.

"Yeah I do see, Olivia," I said. When I said the name, Olivia, I couldn't help but freeze, wondering where that name came from. "Wait, is that your name?" I asked her.

"Yes! Mommies should always know the names of their own daughters!" Olivia giggled. I couldn't help but laugh at my daughter's answer, even though the thought of my own flesh and blood finding a way to travel through time just for this moment still didn't settle in my mind. I was staring at a girl who looked like she could be my younger sister, for crying out loud!

"Well, I need to go. But remember, don't be scared of the bad guys," Olivia said, "Show them your powers, Mommy, and they will be very scared of you."

"I will, Olivia. I promise," I told her.

"I know. I will come back to check on you, and on Daddy."

"Who is your dad?" I asked.

"I am not allowed to tell you, that is one of the rules for me to do this. But don't worry, it won't be long before you find him," she answered.

I wanted to ask who was the one giving her the rules, or at least how she was able to do what she did, but she disappeared with the blue lights and the man that brought her. I looked around the room and found myself sitting on my bed. The sheets were spread out on the bed, and the bed itself was made. When I took off the sheets to tie them together, I just threw around my blankets and pillows without caring about where they landed. '

But everything looked as if nothing happened. I wanted to tell someone about what happened, but I didn't want to be treated as a lunatic. At the same time, I didn't want to forget about it either. That raw power Olivia showed me... just what was it? More importantly, how could I possibly use it?

Downstairs I heard my stepfather once again screaming at my mother. His voice was boiling to the point he could barely be understood, but it was enough to draw out small doses of the power. As his voice came closer to my room, I couldn't help but clench my fists together. I didn't feel the fear like I did other times he started to fire his abuse towards me. I felt... anger. I felt like I actually needed to fight. It was like something had taken over my body, something that felt oddly familiar. I soon didn't have any control over what I was doing and found my actual father's old wooden bat in my closet. He was a baseball fan, even taught me how to play when I was little. And when I saw my stepfather come into my room, I swung harder than I ever did before straight into his crotch.

When he folded his body over as a response to the pain, I continued to swing as hard as I could. It felt amazing doing that to him, hearing the bat continually crushing his skin and bones with every blow. It felt liberating. My

mother didn't feel the same way and had the police arrest me.

I was charged with aggravated assault with a deadly weapon, and spent time in juvenile hall. I tried to tell the police why I fought, but they didn't listen. None of them seemed to feel that the forty-two fractures I made were signs of self-defense. Once I was let out, neither my mom or my stepfather would talk to me about what had happened. They both became silent around me, only letting out an occasional whispered, “excuse me.” At first, I felt that they were ashamed of me. But after a few more months, I was corrected. Olivia was right, people were afraid of what I could do.

Whenever I would walk into a room after I started to hear my step-dad raise his voice, he would quickly get up and get out of the house for hours at a time. As time went on, he slowly overcame his fear of me. It took him a few years in order to get back to his old ways in their entirety, but little did I know it was to give the love of my life a chance to make his appearance and end the suffering once and for all.

Chapter 18
Dakota

“Ramona, you stupid bitch!” my stepfather screamed.

It was about six thirty in the morning when he cried out. It was a school day, back in late April of 2011 if I remember correctly. My stepfather's screams pretty much became my alarm clock. He would always be complaining about something, even though most of the time he was hard to understand.

I was surprised that he hadn't physical for almost six years, but I kept getting the vibe that it was going to change quickly. Just to prepare for when it happened, I managed to think of several escape plans so I wouldn't be the first person the cops would try to lock up. Many of which including jumping out of a second story window.

Ever since I met Olivia, I felt like a completely different person. I felt stronger. I felt like I was able to take on anything that came my way. But days before his final blowup, I felt distracted. I couldn't focus on him or my mom. For some reason, I felt drawn to school out of all places.

“What is the matter Greg?” my mom asked him.

“Why is it that you can't hurry your fat ass up in the mornings?”

“Greg, I am hurrying up as fast as I can, dear.”

I knew that my parents were about to fight again, and I was going to be in the blast zone. My only option was to shower, get dressed, and jump out of my bedroom window with my school supplies cushioning my fall. I always made sure to have a hoodie tucked towards the front of my bag so my textbooks wouldn't tear. School may be a pain but it was my only escape from this hell

hole. A bathroom was next to my room, so with luck, I was able to get ready and out the window in about ten minutes.

My hair could wait until I got on the bus that waited in front of the library. Makeup? No point. I couldn't bring a guy home when things were like this. Last time a guy did come around, he became friends with my stepfather and tried to slice my throat open three months later. Dating wasn't important, and because of my lack of boyfriends, I was always accused of being a lesbian by other girls in my class. I put up with the torments, just because I didn't have a way to escape them. If I tried to kill myself, even if the slightest thought of it popped into my head, the image of Olivia would quickly remind me of why I needed to stay. So, more times than I could count, I tried to analyze guys from school to see which one could be Olivia's father. Sure enough, just to add to my curiosity, Olivia would come around always saying, “Daddy's close.” The little monster was teasing me! But after a while, I started to notice that Olivia made her appearances to hint at her dad's identity always happened around the same two class periods each day, both of which were in the afternoon back-to-back. The first class was English, the second was a weird one known as Touchstones.

Our teacher for Touchstones, Ms. Jacobs, kept saying that the title meant to reach important milestones in our lives, but no one really believed her. Many of the guys joked about how the title of the class sounded like a guy checking for testicular cancer, the same ones famous for making teachers break down into tears for how they acted.

God those guys were annoying!

How they behaved made my daughter's hints towards potential father figures somewhat frightening, to be truthful. I kept my fingers crossed that it wasn't them, looking for any way to weed out the possibility. Soon it hit me that Olivia was trying to tell me I actually shared these classes with her father. Which if I remember correctly, there were only five guys I shared both classes with.

Shoot, what were their names?

If I remember correctly, their names were Jason, Mark, Leonard, Austin, and (of course) Dakota. Just about every other day when Olivia showed up, I couldn't help but stare at each one of them to map out what life could be like if I was to be with them. Jason always gave off a sense of being a lazy slob when he got older. Leonard always seemed to be the type to hide any real intelligence he had, so maybe he wouldn't have been so bad. Austin and Mark seemed like the type of person who would straighten up after school, like becoming big time company CEOs. But Dakota, he was mysterious.

Even though he was big, Dakota always had a way of disappearing right when people thought they knew where he was. Nobody seemed to know much about him. So in many ways, I felt more drawn to him than anyone else. When I would watch him, he seemed more annoyed at the nonsense that came from the other guys in the room than anyone else. He would always clench his fists when the other guys would start acting out in the middle of class. Truth is,

and it shouldn't be too much of a surprise but a lot of people were actually kinda afraid of Dakota. They weren't afraid in the sense that they would run away screaming, but enough to start tensing up whenever he was around. Even I was a bit afraid of Dakota after I saw him throw a kid across the hall.

But one day, it all changed.

"Shandra, you're five," said our Touchstones teacher, Ms. Jacobs. The sound of my teacher's voice jerked my attention back to reality. What happened nearly every day, right towards the end of the school day, my mind would drift off into this dark place. It was almost like an endless abyss, everything around me would be so dark it was impossible to tell the sky from the ground. I would be the only thing that could be seen. It was like I was the only survivor of some massive explosion the took over the entire universe.

Soon voices would start to appear to keep me company, ones that would sound an awful lot like the fights between my step-dad and my mom from later in the day. Maybe that was why my grades weren't the best. For that class period, Ms. Jacobs was making us read from a teen self-help book then we would break off into groups to reenact certain parts. If my memory serves correct, our group was assigned a skit where we would have to act negatively towards a certain situation.

I stood back as I watched all four guys I believed could be the father of my time traveling child, come together in order to make the skit. As the guys started to plan out the details, I watched as Dakota's eyes started to drift in my direction. I couldn't help but wonder if Olivia had led him to me, or even if he knew something that I didn't. All of the guys were huddled around some desks that were bunched together. Mark started to grab some pencils and place them like cars on a busy road.

"Alright, so for the skit, we are going to use the example from the book. The one where a guy gets cut off by a rude driver and starts cussing at him," Mark said.

Jason looked towards Dakota and noticed that his face started to look blank while glancing in my direction. From what I could tell, he knew there was some sort of attraction going on.

"Dakota, focus dude," said Jason.

"Right. Sorry," Dakota said jerking his attention to the plans on the desk, "So what are we planning on doing?"

"Well we are thinking about doing a skit where two guys are driving down the highway than they get cut off by a crazy person," Jason answered while flaring his nose.

"What?" Dakota whined, "Are y'all wanting me to be the other driver?"

"Well you did almost hit me with your car, dude," said Austin.

"Yikes," I quietly giggled to myself. I couldn't help but laugh at the image appearing in my head of Dakota almost running over Austin. Dakota

rolled his eyes and sighed.

“Fine, I'll be the driver,” he said, “ So who all is playing who?”

“I am going to be the director. Jason and Austin are in the first car. You will be in the second car. But, I am not sure about her,” said Leonard as he was looking towards me.

Dakota just smiled and said, “I will go see.”

“Take your time, dude,” encouraged Leonard. Dakota started to walk towards me, practically getting taller with every step he took. As he got closer, my heart started beating faster than ever before.

“Hey,” he said, “Would you like to add in something for the group?”

“No, I don't really work well with groups,” I told him. Dakota sat against a heater that was attached to the wall, just underneath a large window. I could tell he wasn't going to go anywhere. Which was fine, I didn't want him to go anywhere.

“Well to be honest, neither do I,” he smiled.

“Really?” I asked, “Cause you seem to do alright with them.”

“Yeah, I honestly couldn't care less about them,” he answered.

My eyes jumped from their sockets a bit when he said that. It was obvious that he didn't care for the other guys that were in our group, but I was surprised that he would come forward about it.

“I see. But shouldn't you get back to them so you can find out everything for the skit?” I asked him.

“No, not really. I got all of the important stuff already. Now they are just talking about some sort of game that was on last night,” he said pointing at the group. Figures that they were acting like they were part of a football game, even adding silent crowd cheering sound effects for emphasis.

“Point taken,” I giggled.

Dakota looked straight at me as he reached out his hand and said, “Anyway my name is Dakota.”

At first, I hesitated. Just by Dakota reaching his hand out for a handshake made my body want to run as fast as it could, and Dakota didn't do anything at all. It was just the guy I was seeing before him, the one who tried to kill me, shook my hand when we met. Yeah I know it sounds stupid, but I didn't want to go through that again.

“Hey, you don't have to be afraid,” he said, “The worst I could do to you is hug you a little too tight.”

I had to trust him, especially if he was Olivia's father. So I simply smiled and shook his hand. “My name is Shandra,” I said as I pulled my hand away.

“Well Shandra, it is nice to meet you. So why don't you tell me about

yourself?" he asked.

"Why do you want to know?" I asked him.

"Well, to be honest, I think you are cute and I would like to get to know you better." I could feel two small suns burning inside my cheeks when he said that. To be honest, I felt slightly embarrassed. My head tried to hide what I was feeling by tucking my face into my chest. My hair even turned into curtains as they turned my face into a stage as tears began to start a show.

"Hey is everything alright?" Dakota asked. I pulled my head up and wiped the tears from my eyes while brushing my hair back behind my shoulders.

"Yeah, sorry," I said, "It's just been a while since somebody has ever said something like that to me. Thank you."

"You're welcome," Dakota smiled. "But you don't want to hear about me, I am not all that special."

"Oh, I think you're wrong about that."

"How would you know?"

"I can feel it. I can feel that you are somebody that has dealt with a lot in her lifetime. I can feel that you are searching for something, causing you to go day in and day out trying to put together some sort of understanding of the world in order to find whatever it is. I can also feel that you are looking for somebody to help you understand it."

I could feel Dakota's eyes as they stared into mine. It felt as if he was looking for some sort of sign that I was warming up to him. Truth is, I was starting to... "like," Dakota. Just by what he said I felt freer than I ever had in a long time. I wanted to simply break down in his arms and let my entire world come out to him.

My lips started to quiver as I asked, "Really?"

"Of course," he answered, "These days it is something rare, and in several ways, quite beautiful. Especially in a place like this where everybody obsesses over the most worthless parts of life."

I giggled as the glow from my cheeks started getting bright.

"It seems like everybody in the world is the same way," I said, "Then the ones that know how it really is get tossed aside and get treated like trash."

"Tell me about it."

My mind started to drift off into the darkness again as Dakota and I spoke. I didn't know it at the time, but apparently, he could see that my mind was not in a good place and he knew a special trick to get me to come out. In my mind, I was curled into a corner as several voices would constantly harass me without end. As my head was tucked between my knees, I couldn't help but drain the oceans from my eyes.

"Somebody please help me," I cried.

Instead of my voice being muffled, like in previous times, this happened, my voice echoed drowning out the sound of the endless taunts. Was I getting that raw power back? Or was it something else?

“Somebody please help me,” I cried again. This time... the voices were gone and I felt an arm wrapping itself around me. I expected it to start throwing me around, but instead, it gave a gentle squeeze as it guided my head to someone's shoulder.

“I will,” whispered a man's voice.

I cracked my eyes open to see where the voice came from, to find Dakota trying his best to comfort me. Once I realized what was happening, the vision disappeared like a dream. Dakota had his hand gently pressed against my shoulder like he was trying to pull me out of a daydream. Did he somehow influence my vision? It felt like he was actually in the vision with me. Did he know that I saw him there? Or was it just all a coincidence?

“How did you do that?” I asked him.

“Long story short, it is how I know you are special,” he answered.

“What do you...”

“Are you two working with your group?” Ms. Jacobs interrupted.

“Yeah, we got everything taken care of, Ms. Jacobs,” Dakota answered.

“Really?” she nearly shouted, “Then what are you guys doing for the skit?”

Leonard noticed that our teacher was trying to find a way to turn on Dakota for paying attention to things other than the assignment. Which really didn't make sense because Dakota was always one of the ones to get the assignments completed before anyone else, and still hold an A-B average. It wasn't right, or was it Dakota she was after? Was she targeting me?

“We are doing a skit where two guys that are driving off the highway get cut off by a crazy driver that only ends up crashing,” Leonard added.

“Really?” Ms. Jacobs says while staring at Dakota, “So then, Dakota, what are you playing?”

“I am the crazy driver,” he answered. Ms. Jacobs turned to me and asked, “and you are playing as?”

“I am a bystander to the crash,” I replied.

“Alright,” she whispered as she turned to the rest of the class, “You all have a couple more minutes until we start the reenactments.”

Dakota turned to face me and grinned.

“See? Everything I needed to know,” he joked. Dakota's humorous side didn't lighten the situation. I fucking hated the teacher for how she was talking to us. Where did she get off? In fact, where did anyone get off talking like that?

“Is everyone around here that judgmental?” I nearly growled. Dakota

looked like he was wanting to deny my allegations, but I could see him swallowing something he wanted to say. Instead, he took a deep breath as he thought of something new to say.

“Just about,” he answered, “But keep your eyes open, you will find the few good ones laying around.”

“I hope you're right. Back at my old school nobody was kind,” I told him.

“I don't know, I wasn't really liked by a lot of people back at my old school and everyone would just keep harassing me about it. It seemed to be the same way at every school I would go to.”

“I know how you feel. It's pathetic how people treat one another these days.”

“Exactly! You never know what people might do for you in the long run that might help you out.”

“I'm glad to finally meet someone else that sees that.”

“Well you know the saying, 'The most knowledgeable are the most neglected in masses of the idiotic', it seems to become truer every day.”

“I have never heard it put quite like that before, yet it pretty much covers it all. I'm impressed.”

“Thanks.”

Something about what Dakota was doing made me feel more open. I felt warmer. I felt, freer. I felt like a better life was coming together for me. I wanted to continue talking with Dakota, in fact, it felt like I could talk to him about anything... forever.

“Alright everyone, back to your seats we need to get started on the skits,” shouted the teacher.

'Damn it!' I mentally screamed.

All of the guys in my group, except Dakota, threw their arms into the air to volunteer us to go first.

“I guess it's showtime,” Dakota joked.

“I guess so,” I told him.

Dakota started to walk towards his desk as the teacher ordered. But before he had a chance to leave, I wrapped my arms around him as he turned away.

“Thank you,” I whispered to him. He didn't say anything, but a smile grew on his face. As my arms pried away from his body and we both sat in our desks, Ms. Jacobs got ready to get the skits started out.

“Dakota! Who all is in your group?” Ms. Jacobs asked.

“Shandra, Austin, Leonard, Jason, Mark and myself,” Dakota

answered.

“Do you have your skit ready?”

“Heck yeah!” Mark interrupted.

“Then get up there,” she said trying to rush us.

The guys all ran to the front of the classroom to set up the skit while I stood by the window as a bystander. An office chair was placed just a few feet behind a desk. I couldn't figure out what they were planning since I noticed Dakota with an evil look on his face. He had something in mind that was different from the other guys, something absolutely goofy. Considering he was holding his arms in the air and started flapping it around like he was dancing in a topless sports car. Needless to say, the loud screaming noises and Dakota rolling over a desk. It was the funniest thing I ever saw. When Dakota looked like he was hurt, the entire class jumped out of their seats laughing.

“Dakota are you alright?” asked Ms. Jacobs when she could finally catch her breath.

Dakota got up, slightly dazed from the ordeal, and answered, “Yeah, I'm fine, just uh got a little carried away with the scene, that is all.”

“Well no kidding dude, you weren't supposed to do that!” said Mark.

“You know what, it made it better didn't it?” Dakota replied.

“You guys do have to admit what Dakota did made your skit funnier. A's for all of you,” said Ms. Jacobs.

“Well there you go!” shouted Dakota.

'My god, he is a lunatic!' I laughed in my head.

“Did you enjoy the show?” Dakota asked quietly.

Somehow, right after the set was demolished, Dakota managed to sneak his way to the side of my desk with a big smile on his face. I couldn't help but start laughing again and nodding my head.

“Awesome,” he grinned.

Yep, Dakota was definitely a guy worth figuring out. Something told me that a lot of people have been trying to crack him, with very little success. Who knew, maybe I would be the one to make it through the mold. I couldn't really pay attention the rest of class for the rest of the day. What I saw with Dakota stuck itself in my head, constantly replaying itself. Even during gym class, I couldn't get his image out of my mind, but truthfully I didn't try.

It was a much nicer image than what was normally on my mind. But when I got home that night, a fist to my nose and a belt around my neck took me out for the night. At least for most of the night. I woke up in the middle of the night and found myself in my bedroom, fully clothed in my pajamas.

“Are you okay mommy?” asked a familiar voice.

“Who is there?” I asked. A bright blue light appeared by my bedside,

one that nearly burned my eyes out of their sockets. Soon a little girl appeared from the light, my little girl.

"Hey, Olivia. How is everything?"

"Good! I was just with Daddy!"

"How is he?" "

Good. He was just working."

"He has a job? Cool!"

"Yeah, he helps people. But not like a doctor, he helps with problems people can't see. He will be able to help you, soon."

"How?"

"You will see. But, you should probably talk to Grandma. She is awake right now, worried about you."

"Really why?"

"She is feeling guilty. Just talk to her about your day."

Why should I talk to her when she was letting this happen to me? I wanted to say no, but seeing Olivia made me think otherwise. It would be nice to just be able to sit down and talk with my mom for once. It would just be nice to be able to tell her a guy was catching my attention.

Before I could say anything else to her, Olivia disappeared. Not being able to say anything else, I started to think more about my mom. Somehow, I started to feel like about to lose her. Ever feel like a deep pit grows inside of you when you start to think you are about to lose someone? I kept getting that feeling, so I went downstairs just so I could have a few more minutes with her.

Sure enough, when I got downstairs, I found my mother laying back while working on a crochet pattern. She always loved to crochet something when she felt tired but couldn't sleep.

"Hey mom," I moaned, "What'cha working on?"

"Just the cherry blossom pattern I never finished," she answered, "What are you doing up?"

"Couldn't get back to sleep. I've got a lot like on my mind lately."

"Like what?"

'How about why I don't remember anything between now and when I came home from school?' I thought to myself, "There is this guy from school I can't really get out of my head."

"Oh really?" she asked while turning her head to face me. She continued to crochet without looking directly at the pattern. When I was little, I thought my mom was part robot whenever she did that. She never messed up!

"Yeah, he seems to be different from the other guys at school," I told her.

"That is what you said about the last guy you went out with, do you need to be reminded of what happened?" she asked.

"No, Mom, I don't," I answered, "This guy is way different from John."

"How so?"

"This one doesn't really care much for other guys at school. John always was cocky around his friends, Dakota is just quiet."

"So his name is Dakota, huh? Can you tell me anything else about him?"

"Well, we just started talking, so I can't really say much," I told her. *'How about the fact that I have been seeing a small girl who claims to be my daughter and he just MIGHT be the father?'* I thought to myself, *'Even though there are at least three other guys that could be it?'*

"Alright," she nodded, "Can you at least tell me what he looks like?"

"Trust me, Mom, you would know him when you saw him?"

"How so?"

"He is like freakishly tall! I actually thought he was a senior."

"Really? Is he the type of guy who is really tall and skinny or..."

"Actually, he looks like he would be a really good football player. But he acts like he doesn't really care much for sports."

"Then what does he care for, you know, activity wise? And are you sure?"

"I don't know. Like I said, we haven't had much time to talk."

"Why, hun?"

"We were put in a group together in class and the teacher interrupted us before we could talk further."

"Hun, if he didn't try to find a way to talk with you more he might not be interested."

"Don't worry, he did find a way."

"Well tell me!"

"During a skit that our group put together, he actually made it a point to make everybody in class jump out of their chairs laughing."

"How?"

I went on to explain to my mom everything Dakota did to make every face in class turn forty shades of red all at once. Just by me telling about what happened, my mom laughed so hard she lost track of her place in the crochet pattern.

"Right as everyone calmed down, he came over to ask me whether or not I liked what he did."

"What did you tell him?"

"I couldn't say anything because I started laughing again. So I just nodded my head. He seemed glad."

"Then I hope to meet this young man soon."

Needless to say, she soon got her chance.

PROOF

Chapter 19
“Dakota is The One”

Apparently, the cops were watching my house for the previous couple of days. They never came in to check on me. They never tried to help me. They just sat in their cruiser and drove away whenever they got bored or had another call. I didn't see them much, and when I did I simply was too pissed off at them for not doing anything.

The day after I met Dakota, tensions at home were at an all time high. Furniture seemed to sprout legs and leap in every direction possible. The microwave and couch joined hands and leaped through the wall. Plates shattered in laughter as they fell to the floor. Elephants trampled and screamed through the roof. A circus of Hell would rise from the ground every chance it got, but with every Saturday came the day the circus needed to go grocery shopping, and give the performers a chance to rest. Every Saturday was grocery day.

The ride to the grocery store was probably the most we looked like a normal family. Just a man, woman, and child out running weekend errands were all outsiders would ever see. I wore a turtleneck and acted like I had a bit of a cold to cover the bruises left by my step-dad. Nobody outside of the side ever knew something was wrong. Perhaps the saddest part of it all was I looked forward to grocery shopping because my stepfather always stayed in the car. It would just be me and my mom. No yelling, no fighting, just quiet time. We always took our time in the store, just talking about normal mother-daughter stuff in between each “Hey can you grab this,” and, “Hey can we get this?”

Needless to say, it was nice while it lasted.

“Shandra, honey can you go grab the mini corn dogs? The ones you like?” my mom asked.

“Sure thing, anything else while I am over there?” I asked her.

“No, not that I can think of.”

I walked through the store to find the mini corn dogs that were a few aisles away. The employees had been trying to redecorate the store for a few weeks thanks to a new crap load of corporate funding. When I got into the aisle I was looking for, I noticed that what I was wanting was a little higher than I could reach. Feeling stupid in front of a man that pulled up with his cart behind me, I started to jump in order to reach the box, quietly joking about wishing Dakota was there to be my human ladder.

“Here, let me get that for you,” he said.

“Oh, thank you,” I said backing away. The man was very tall, so tall he was able to practically reach into the freezers while standing clear across an aisle about four feet wide. I didn't pay much attention to what he looked like, other than he looked kinda tired. But once he handed me the box, I couldn't believe who I saw.

“Dakota!” I nearly squealed like a little kid.

“Surprise!” he smiled, “I happened to be passing through and thought you could have used a little help.”

“I am glad that you did. When I couldn't reach it I was starting thinking of you,” I said blushing. *'How does he keep making me blush?'*

“I hope that is a good thing.”

“It is,” I told him.

My eyes happened to drift towards his shopping cart full of groceries. I was surprised by what I saw since I figured most guys my age would mostly get snacks and drinks. But no, not Dakota, he was actually grocery shopping.

“Is that your cart?” I asked.

“Yeah, I am just grabbing some stuff for my house,” he answered.

“Oh really? Where are your parents?” The look on Dakota's face that grew after I asked him about his family seemed to want to dance around what he was wanting to say. It was almost like he was slightly embarrassed.

“I, uh, actually live by myself,” he finally answered.

'How?' I asked in my head, “Really? Where do you live?”

“I live in the large gray house on Eastlake, the one across from the cemetery.”

“Oh yeah, I have seen you around there before. But how can you afford to live there by yourself? It's a pretty shitty economy and hardly anybody can hold together their own life.”

“Well, I helped with a few projects in areas above what the recession is affecting.”

'What projects?' I asked in my head, “You're lucky. Maybe I can come by sometime?”

"Sure, I got no problem with it. I have plenty of room," he answered.

"Cool," I smiled.

'Is he telling the truth? Someone our age shouldn't be that lucky. Now I am curious about him,' I thought to myself.

I wanted to take more time to mentally analyze Dakota, but my mother speaking up drew away my thought process.

"Shandra I got the... who is this?" she asked.

"Oh hey, Mom. This is my friend Dakota, the one I told you about from school," I answered.

"Oh yeah, you weren't kidding. He is huge." Dakota reached his hand and said, "It's nice to meet you."

"Likewise Mr. Frandsen. And please call me Ramona," she said when grabbing Dakota's hand. I could feel my mom mentally prepare how to skin Dakota alive as their hands touched. But... how did she know his last name? Hell, I didn't know his last name at the time! I knew she had weird tricks, but that was just plain creepy. Soon, she added to the uneasiness as she turned her head to face me.

"Shandra, please head back over to the produce. I think I forgot the tomatoes for salad tonight."

"But mom...." I said. "Just go do it," my mom grunted.

'Fine, just please don't scare him away. I don't know if you're soon to be granddaughter might stick!' I mentally screamed as I did as I was told.

The voices of my mother and my friend quickly faded away. I hurried over to the produce section, which was on the other side of the store, and quickly sorted through several old tomatoes just to try and find the freshest looking pair. Once I found the good tomatoes, I wrapped two in plastic wrap and hurried back to my mom and Dakota while praying Dakota wasn't gone. As I walk back into the aisle, I saw my mom and Dakota in the same position I left them in. The bits of conversation I heard between the two, I can never forget.

"If something were to happen to your daughter I could, make that I will, personally make sure they used everything to find her and put down the sick bastards that hurt her, even if it means soaking my own hands in their blood just so I could carry her home," said Dakota, "I know I just said I was just hoping to be friends with Shandra, but in all honesty something about her makes me pray that someday something much more would bring us together."

My mom and Dakota didn't seem to notice that I was back. So I snuck around them both to slid the tomatoes in the cart without noticing.

"I am going to hold you to that," my mom said.

"I wouldn't expect anything less," Dakota replied.

'Oh, thank god,' I mentally screamed while wrapping my arms around Dakota.

"Thank you," I said to him. Dakota wrapped his arms around me. It felt good to hear his pulse against my cheek. It finally felt like someone actually cared about me. I could feel his eyes staring down at me. He wasn't being cocky, or rude in any way, he was just a giant. I wanted to spill all of my secrets to him right then and there, but my mind wouldn't spill anything. So I slid my body up just right, so the scars on my neck could be seen better. I prayed that he would see them and know right away that I was being hurt.

The change in his heart told me that he got the message, and he was thinking about doing something about it. While his body parted ways from mine, he started to dig into his pockets and pull out a tiny card with a bunch of information on it.

"Here, take this," he told me.

"What is it?" I asked him.

"My card," he answered, "If you need help with anything, or just someone to talk to, don't be afraid to get a hold of me. Day or night, I will always answer."

I carefully looked at the card Dakota gave me just so I could memorize everything in case I lost it.

The card read, *"Dakota Frandsen – Paranormal Investigator. Founder of the Paranormal Raider Force. Phone number – (208) 555-8773. Website – http://frandsenfiles.webs.com/."*

"Thank you," I told him while starting to tear up again. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Even though Dakota and I had just met, he was already willing to help me. It almost felt like some sort of fairy tale was coming to life before my very eyes. Better yet, it was a fairy tale about me. A young girl who brings together her parents at a time where they needed each other the most, oh the things that could happen!

My mom and I started to walk away from Dakota, as I tucked the card into my pants pocket, without saying anything else. It felt very rude, but in both of our heads, we knew that it wasn't going to be the last time we saw each other. We made our way towards the registers. Dakota was about three aisles away from us and started talking with an old woman who was working the register. Judging by the way they were talking, they knew each other for a long time, and there was some bad news.

Dakota quickly came to tears from what he heard. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but soon I would get my own bad news. A text message popped up on my mom's phone. Her ring tone sounded like deep marching drums, from Hell. Something that she was forced to put on her phone, by my stepfather, from Hell! My mom looked down at her phone to read the message.

"Shandra, honey, we better hurry," she said, "Your step dad is getting cranky again."

"Mom, when isn't he cranky," I nearly shouted.

"Hey, don't talk about him like that. Something doesn't feel right."

"Since when were the things he put us through ever right?!" I froze the second those words came out of my mouth. I didn't know why I said them, but it felt very good.

"I know, I know. Just help me hurry these out to the car so we can get out of here," my mother admitted. We hurried as fast as we could through the register and ran outside. I kept looking back at Dakota, hoping that he would see that something was wrong.

When he acted like he didn't notice anything, I gave up and prepared for the worst. The moment my mom and I hit the front, sliding doors, we could hear my stepfather's screaming as it nearly broke through all of the windows in every car in the parking lot. Opening the trunk of the car to load the groceries made his shouting become forty thousand times louder! As my mom and I nearly threw all of our groceries into the trunk, I noticed that Dakota was talking on his phone while looking in all different directions. I tried my best to avoid looking at him so my stepfather wouldn't start targeting me or him because he thought there was something going on between us. In many ways, there was something but even I didn't know what the heck it was.

My stepfather chasing Dakota away was the last fucking thing I needed. My mother and I jumped into the car, once the groceries were in the trunk, and drove away from Dakota like a bat out of Hell. Mom always drove the car, since Greg always threw a fit. I couldn't count the times he was hard to understand because of his constant yelling, much like he was acting in the car. But when I could understand him, I was able to find out he had survived an IED while over in Iraq. I know now that he was dealing with PTSD, but back then I would swear how jumpy his reactions would get were because of some sort of demons tormenting him What was worse, was that I heard demons myself saying that I should "save him" by slicing his throat open.

What scares me is that it sounded like a very good idea. I couldn't ever bring myself to do it, but each day I had taken a belt to the neck or was stripped naked by him before bed, I wished I would do it. When we got home, that urge grew as he dragged my mother and I by our hair into the house and started to throw us around like rag dolls. Our heads were tossed through furniture. The microwave and TV tore through the walls and shattered any trace of glass on the family photos.

"Greg, honey, what is the matter?" cried my mom as blood started to spill from her mouth like drool from a hound.

"SHUT UP, YOU STUPID BITCH!" he screamed. As his focus turned to charging towards my mom, I hurried to grab a knife from the kitchen. The evil voices in my head grew stronger.

"Now is your chance," they said, "Kill him now! Protect your mother!"

I didn't argue with them. I didn't want to argue. Something needed to be done. That day was the worst I had ever seen him. He was way beyond the point

of control, passing the point of disturbed man and became a rabid animal. He needed to be put down. I grabbed the largest knife I could find and hurried back to confront the bastard. I found him bashing my mother's face into the coffee table. Her blood might as well have become a sketch artist for the evening. I wanted it to end, and as I rushed to his back, I could finally see it happening.

With one large thrust into his spine, I managed to trade in my mother's beating for a broken nose that crawled its way to my brain. I tried to hold back the blood with the palms of my hands and soon found myself dodging knives as I ran up the stairs. I couldn't stop the bleeding, I couldn't stop him. I needed help. I needed Dakota. I ran into my room and tried to find Dakota's card in my pants once I felt the blood stop coming out of my nose but I couldn't find it. Thinking that it must've fallen out I started dialing 911 on my cell phone. What I heard on the other end of the line, perhaps scared me more than anything else.

“911 what is your emergency?” asked a woman's voice.

“Yes, I need help. My stepfather has gone crazy. He is going to kill my mom!” I cried into the phone.

Out of nowhere, some sort of repetitive, high pitched feedback interrupted the conversation. Then some sort of robotic breathing took over the line. “Is this Shandra Ford?” the robot voice asked.

“Yes...” I answered, “Who is this?”

“Someone who has been watching over you for a very long time. I know you are scared but just please, hang tight. The police are already on their way to you right now. ”

“But, how did they...”

“There is no time to explain,” the robot interrupted, “You will be fine, my little Cherry Blossom.”

My eyes jumped out of my head. There was only one person who called me by that name.

“Dad?” I asked. As soon as I asked, the line went dead. It couldn't have been my father, he died years before that day. But who else would've known?

Before I could try to figure out what was going on, the whole house began to shake as the front door was kicked in. My stepfather's rampage immediately froze.

“Police! Get down on the ground right now!” shouted a man downstairs.

“Get the fuck out of my house!” Greg screamed.

“We can't do that. You are going to come with us before this gets any more out of hand!” shouted another man.

“Fuck you! Did the cunt upstairs call you?!” Greg demanded to know.

“I cannot tell you that, sir. But right now you need to put that gun down or I will make sure that you won't be able to walk away from this!” shouted the

first man.

Greg, probably grunting like a caveman, accepted the man's warning as a challenge and charged him. Four gun shots yanked the tortured screams out of my stepdad. Someone finally put a bullet into him.

“Go upstairs, see if anyone is here,” suggested the second man, “Yeah, we are going to need a med unit or two. Looks like this domestic got pretty bad.”

I heard footsteps press against the wooden steps. About a third of the way up the stairs, the man stopped and shifted his weight.

“Cortez, we got a blood trail leading all the way to a bedroom. Looks mostly like a really bad nose bleed,” said the first man.

“Be careful,” said Cortez. “

Is there anyone up here?” asked the first man.

'Mommy, it's okay,' said Olivia's voice in my head, *'He is a cop and a friend of Daddy's.'*

I had to believe her. This had to be my chance to get away from it all. “I'm in here!” I shouted. The man walked in with his gun drawn. Olivia was right he was a police officer.

“Are you alright?” he asked. I shook my head, no. I wasn't alright. My nose was nearly shoved straight into my brain.

“What is your name, sweetie?” asked the officer.

“Shandra,” I answered. “Well Shandra, my name is Officer Jerome. Can you tell me what happened?”

“My stepdad, he went nuts while we were grocery shopping. Then when we got home, he started throwing my mom and I around. I tried to stop him myself but he was too strong and used the back of his head to break my nose,” I answered, “So I ran up here to stop the bleeding.”

“Okay,” he whispered, “How did you try to stop him?”

“I stabbed him in the back, up by his shoulder,” I answered before bursting down into tears. I could feel the salt washing away the blood from my hands as they pressed against my face. I could hear the metal of officer Jerome's pistol sliding against the fabric of his holster and the button click as he secured it.

“Hey, it's going to be alright. It is over now,” Jerry said as he kneeled in front of me, “Here, let me take a look.”

I moved my hands as Jerome started to press his fingers against my skin. I could feel my body wanting to jump straight into the sky as my nerves panicked about being hurt further.

“Does it hurt?” the officer asked.

“Yeah, a lot,” I answered.

“We will have the paramedics check you out,” he said, “Just wait here a moment, I need to talk with my partner. Is there a restroom up here?”

“Yeah, do you mind if I use it to wash up?” “That was what I was about to suggest,” he answered, “I'll come back to get you.”

“Okay.”

As Officer Jerome walked back down the stairs, I hurried into the bathroom to wash up. I looked outside to find two police cars parked in the grass in front of my house. A third showed up with what looked like an attack dog. There was some fuss downstairs that sounded like my stepdad continued to put up a fight. The dog was let out of the car, and his handler lets him charge inside the house.

I could hear it growl downstairs as it went after Greg. I could hear the cops beating and tazing him downstairs as his body beat against the floor like a fish out of water. Within minutes two of the police officers had Greg in cuffs and took him out to the back of a patrol car. At the same time, one of the officer's came back up stairs.

“Shandra, are you still up here?” Jerome asked.

“Yeah, I am in the bathroom,” I yelled.

“Why don't we get you out of here? There is someone here that wants to see you.”

“Huh? Who would want to see me?”

“Perhaps the type of person you need to see right now. Someone who knows how to spot living nightmares better than most people,” he answered, “Someone who you go to school with.”

I had a flashback of Dakota and his card. *'Could it have been him?'* I asked myself, *'That is impossible. The cops wouldn't call on anyone who wasn't in civil services to help with a domestic disturbance.'*

Outside I heard a car screech behind a cruiser. The window was one those windows that were made to make anything on the other side seem blurred and distorted. I could tell it was a larger man that came out of the car and he was rushing to the house. One officer stopped him as the large man made it to the yellow police tape.

“Get Officer Jerome out here!” he shouted.

“We better get down there,” said Jerome. I nodded and started to follow him downstairs. As our feet hit the bottom step, I could make out more about who was outside my house. Like piranhas to a bloody bird that fell in the water, the place was swarmed with cops.

“It's alright Cortez, I called him here,” shouted officer Jerome. Officer Jerome wrapped his arm around me as he took me out of the house. Everything was much more destroyed than I remembered. The doorway was practically torn in two. Everything was coated in a red hue, maybe it was because my own eyes

were so messed up. The sunlight felt like my face was being shoved into a campfire, so I tried to bury into Officer Jerome's jacket as we stepped outside.

"Are you sure?" asked Cortez. I lifted my head just to look around. I saw people in other houses just watching to see what was going on and cops standing around to keep people away. I was trying to scan for anyone that would have to come to get me. Maybe one of my grandparents or aunts I told everything to, or even a friend from school.

But once I saw Dakota, I knew what Olivia had told me was the truth. He was going to be the one to get me out of that mess. I felt overwhelmed and excited with adrenaline rushing through my body. Soon I found myself dangling from his neck. My body pressing against his skin felt like I was being crushed by a flaming boulder. I knew he didn't mean to hurt me since it was hard for him to have a tender touch. But I didn't care for the simple reason I knew he wasn't going to hurt me, otherwise, Olivia wouldn't have come back to make sure we came together. I was so drawn to him, my arms started to squeeze him at the same strength his arms were holding me as I started to feel the bones in his neck pressing against the bones in my arms.

"Never mind then," sighed Cortez. I could hear officer Jerome approach Cortez from behind me. I could barely see, from the corner of my eye, those two as they stood next to each other. Jerome placed his hand on Cortez's shoulder.

"Why don't you move along?" Jerome asked, "I need to talk with these two real quick before med-units arrive."

"Yeah," Cortez replied while brushing the hand off his shoulder, "I'll go see what the hold-up is."

Cortez walked out of my vision as he approached his car to use his radio. Dakota tried to be gentle as he wrapped his arms around me. I don't know how, but it felt like he was closing me off from the world. I didn't feel anything, not the stress of having cops surrounding my house, not the fear of dying, not the pain from my injuries, nothing. I felt nothing but peace. I tried to adjust my head so I could see officer Jerome better. I wanted to know what he was needing to say, as he started to tuck his thumbs underneath his belt.

"So what's the situation?" Dakota asked.

"She and her mom got beat up pretty bad, I think that both will be okay but we need have med-units examine both before they leave the scene," Jerome answered, "Can you hold out? I know you probably have some things to look through from your last case."

"Yeah, I can stay for as long as I am needed."

"Then you might be here for a while." I saw officer Cortez start waving his hand towards officer Jerome.

"Hey Jerry!" he shouted, "Can I get you to come here for a minute?"

Jerome turned his head and shouted, "Yeah, just hold on a second,"

before looking me in the eyes and asked, “You guys going to be okay?”

Dakota and I both shook our heads unanimously.

“Good,” Jerome replied just before he started jogging towards Cortez.

Dakota moved his head just right to pry my hands apart so he could lead me to the hood of his car. As his body sank the front of the car, I draped my legs over his to make myself comfortable.

“Do your legs hurt?” he asked me.

“It hurts when you hold me,” I whispered.

“I'm sorry.”

“It's okay. I just wish that was all that it was.”

“You and me both.” Finally, he had started talking to me. To this day, I didn't know why he waited until we were alone to ask how I was doing. Parts of me thought he was only pretending to care. But as I dug myself further into his chest, and started to hear the sound of his heart beating, I knew that his concerns were real.

I must've shivered while he was holding me because he adjusted his arms so that more of his body heat would reach my body. I didn't know how he did it at the time, but as his heart started to settle against my skin, I could feel all of my injuries start to heal by themselves. This sensation of a warm blanket covering me during a winter storm took over my entire body as I could feel every pain I felt slowly disappearing. If I hadn't known better, I would have sworn I was in the presence of an angel that was covering me with his wings. Suddenly, Dakota jerked when the sounds of an ambulance siren quickly grew louder. The jerk seemed to rip away the blanket and stop the healing process.

My entire body felt slightly better, but it was still hard for me to move. I wanted to keep the image of Dakota and myself isolated from the world burned into my mind, so I kept my eyes sealed shut so it wouldn't escape.

“Can you get up?” Dakota asked.

“No,” I answered.

“Okay,” he said, “The paramedics are finally here. They need to make sure that you're okay before I can take you out of here.”

“Please, carry me.”

“I will.”

With a careful bounce, Dakota rose from the hood of his car and started to carry me toward the ambulance. From behind us I could the car uncompromising and adjust itself to a normal position. I slowly opened my eyes to find my mom, still inside the house, with a smile on her face as Dakota carried me. We were finally getting away.

I cringed a little as I felt my bottom touch the cold metal tailgate of the ambulance. Dakota took two steps back to give room for two women to start

checking me. They both looked exhausted from a long day's work. The pressed their fingers against various spots on my body, asking how much it hurt. I gave them numbers from a scale from one to ten in order to rate the pain.

Once they got all of their readings on a clipboard, they started to shine a flashlight in my eyes to check for a concussion. I felt a second gust of energy throughout the field examination, which helped me pass. While being prodded by the two paramedics, Dakota and officer Jerome walked away together and started to talk about what was going. They both acted like they were old crime-fighting partners, officer Jerome being the paranoid sidekick and Dakota being the courageous, smart-ass leader that always took the group into dangerous territory.

I could barely make out what they were saying, but I knew it was about me.

"Alright, honey, it looks like you are going to be alright. Just make sure to take it easy for a few days and clean yourself up once you get the chance," said one of the paramedics.

"Okay, so does that mean I can go?" I asked.

"Yeah," answered the other paramedic, "Just be careful, alright? Don't get too rough with your boyfriend."

"He is not my boyfriend!" I blushed, "I don't know what he is."

"Honey, he came for you at a time like this," said the first paramedic, "That should be enough to say he is capable of being someone much more important. Just go talk to him, you will see."

"Alright," I said while getting off the back of the ambulance, "Thank you."

"Take care." As I walked towards Dakota and officer Jerome, I watched as another team of paramedics loaded my stepfather into the other ambulance and drive away. Very few people seemed to actually notice that he was gone. Officer Jerome was overtaking Dakota's attention as he was rambling about what was going on.

"I am just saying that you need to find a way to separate yourself otherwise you will only end up getting yourself killed if something happens," officer Jerome said before pausing.

Officer Jerome turned his head to face me. Dakota took a second to notice where Jerome's attention was focused then turned to finally see I was around.

"Hey. How did it go?" he asked me.

"Fine," I answered, "They just said that I should just take it easy for a few days."

"Good. That can easily be arranged."

Dakota glanced back at officer Jerome. The look on his face suggested

that he had something planned for me.

“What do you mean? What is gonna happen now?” I asked him, slightly panicked.

“We are going to place you under protective custody,” answered officer Jerome, “At least for a couple weeks while the investigation continues.”

'What?! What did he mean?' I thought to myself, “A couple weeks? I don't want to go to some foster home for a couple weeks, the people there could be much worse!”

“I know, I know,” Jerome stressed, “But we have an arrangement that would benefit everyone, even though in most cases it would be impossible to pull off. You will be staying with a close partner of mine here in town. That way you won't miss anything at school and you won't have to worry about getting moved around the state. Plus if you ever run into trouble, I'd much rather prefer that you would be around him than anyone else. He will take care of you.”

“What do you mean? Who is it?!” I asked. Dakota answered by giving a playful two-fingered salute.

“Dakota?” I asked confused. The whole thought of me being put under the care of someone the same age as me was weird, and in no way could be legal. Thousands of thoughts started to run through my head. How the heck would that be possible? And why would he want to take in someone like me?

“I figured that coming with me would be a more favorable outcome to all of this,” Dakota answered.

'O...kay, I guess if it is okay,' I thought to myself, “Are you sure? I wouldn't want to impose.”

“It is no imposition. I made a promise to always answer your call, this is one of those answers. There is plenty of everything for both of us at my place.”

“So... you're serious?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Thank you. Not a lot of guys would do that for a girl they just met.”

Dakota acted like he was about to say something else, but officer Jerome interrupted and said, “I hate to interrupt this loveydovey moment, but the social workers are on their way and they will try to tear apart our arrangement. So Shandra, why don't you get about two weeks worth of stuff packed up?”

“Alright,” I answered, “But can you come with me, Dakota?”

“Sure thing,” he answered. I reached my hand out with my palm facing the sky. Dakota took a few seconds to think before grabbing my hand. I could tell that he had his own thoughts about taking me in, possibly ones that were telling him that he should've turned me away. But, if he was willing to take the risk, I figured it wouldn't hurt to make the same wager. I walked him through my house, as people in jackets with the word “FORENSICS” written on the

backs were looking around.

The cracking of glass under our feet made the air feel like the aftermath of an earthquake. I could tell Dakota was looking around at the damage, waiting for some story about what happened to come to him. When we walked up the stairs, I could tell he was making mental notes of the blood. The way he reacted was a lot like the forensics teams, quiet and distant from the scene. Once we entered my room, I let go of Dakota's hand and grabbed the first bag I could find so I could start packing. Dakota turned his back against me so he wouldn't see anything.

'At least chivalry isn't dead,' I thought to myself.

Dakota continued to be silent while I packed up. I wanted him to start talking, but I was afraid of what he would have said something diminishing about what happened. Was he going to be all, "Dude, this is awful," or "This looks like a movie," and be completely insensitive? My own anxieties tore away at every thought of him being a legitimately good person, even though he would quickly prove to be just that.

"So, how did it happen?" he asked. I didn't want to go far into detail, and I knew that he knew how I felt. But I figured I might as well say something. It hurt to say anything, but I might as well tell him how I felt about it all since it was clear we were going to be seeing a lot of each other.

"Uh... my parents got into a fight, then my dad got a little rough. I tried to stop them but I only made it worse. When it kept going I hurried upstairs to call the police, but then the lady said they were already on their way so I started to freak out..." I answered while choking on my tears.

The sunlight started to brush against my skin as the clouds stopped hiding it away. The house suddenly felt warmer than it ever did. Tiny stars reflected onto the ceiling from the silver designs on a pair of pants I was packing away. The glare of the light made me turn to look Dakota directly in the eye. I could tell he was looking into my eyes, trying to read my mind. I started to walk his way for a hug, but right when I was at his feet I collapsed and burst into tears. I couldn't hold it in anymore, and I knew Dakota was looking for it to happen. He made sure to dive in order to keep me from drowning, and I couldn't help but grip onto him for dear life.

"Dakota," I cried, "This is all my fault. I should have done more to stop this when this all began!"

I felt a bit of a pressure in Dakota's chest when I said that. I could tell he was starting to cry as well at what happened. He was trying to be my rock.

"Let's get you on the bed," he said to get his mind away from the sadness a bit. He walked me back over to my bed, next to where I had my bag sitting, and sat down next to me. He guided my head to his chest. I could hear his heart try to comfort me as he gently drew tiny hearts just a little above my left eye with his pointer finger.

Something about what he was doing was helping me relax. He and I

just kept silent, not saying anything further about what was going on around us until I heard him swallow so he could prepare something new to say.

"This was not your fault," he whispered, "None of this was ever your fault."

"Yes... it is," I told him, "All of my family blames me for this ever since it started."

"Shandra, don't let them make you believe that. None of this was your fault."

"But... I could have stopped it. I could have saved him when he came back from the war."

"There was nothing you could have done. Trust me, I know what it is like to feel guilty about the pain you see when a loved one is hurt. I know just how much you would do just to fix what has been done. And I know just how much it hurts when there is nothing you could do."

I sat up when he claimed he knew just how much I hurt from what happened. I wiped off my tears and asked, "How would you know?"

"I think that we need to get you out of here and relaxed before I can say anything," he said.

'Smart move,' I thought to myself. But another part of me knew he was right.

"Okay," I said. I stood up and continued packing while Dakota sat for a few moments so he could wipe his own tears away. He watched what I put into my bag, hopefully just to make a note of everything. I didn't really pay attention to what I put into my bag at the time, other than a small stuffed polar bear with a red heart on its chest. It was a gift from my biological father the Christmas before he died. I was expecting some sort of sarcastic comment from him when I set the bear inside the bag, but he didn't say anything about it.

"Do you have everything?" he asked.

I nodded my head, "yes."

'I just want to leave,' I whispered in my mind.

"Then let's go," he said. I jumped when he responded to what I was thinking. It was the first time he ever responded to something I was thinking about. Was it just a freak coincidence? Something told me that it wasn't.

"How did you do that?" I asked.

"You will see soon enough," he answered. I zipped up my bag and walked to Dakota's side. He took me under his arm and placed a kiss on my forehead. It was the one sign I needed all this time, just to know someone was looking out for me. Inside me, I felt the growing need for him, one that would eventually lead to the birth of our daughter. My eyes locked themselves into his and I could see he was feeling the same way. He slowly leaned down as I jumped up to seal the kiss.

When our lips touched, it felt like the entire world just stopped. My entire body suddenly became warmer. It felt calm, relaxing, almost something like out the movies. It felt like a fairytale. I didn't think such things actually existed. After what seemed like forever, I lifted my lips from his and just hung from his neck. Dakota then placed his forehead against mine, with his eyes closed as a smile grew on his face.

"Shall we get out of here?" he asked. I nodded my head and giggled as Dakota snuck one more kiss on my forehead. It felt nice, as the spot where his lips touched soon became warm and relaxing. To this day I can still feel it there every time I think about it. Because it all felt nice, a part of me still doubted that it was all real. Was Dakota just being nice because he felt bad? Would he try to get rid of me the first chance he got after we got into a fight? Was he going to be just like Greg? All these questions and more would not leave me alone at all until a very familiar voice decided to visit me.

"Shandra, when you get older and if you want to know if a boy really really likes you, just take three breaths and only listen to the sound of his heart. If it sounds just like your heart, then the boy really does like you," whispered the voice. "I will, Grandma," whispered my five-year-old voice. I took the chance on my grandma's advice she gave me when I was little, and slide myself off of Dakota so I could listen to his heart beat. What I heard when his heart began to sync with mine, sounded like some sort of dreamy message that I could never forget.

If I had to convert it to a way I could put it on paper, I would have to put it like this, ".. / .-- .. .-.. .-.. / .- .-.. .-- .- -.-- ... / .-.. --- ...- . / -.-- --- ..- --..-- / -. --- / -- .- - - . .-. / .-- .... .- - / .... .- .-. .--. . -. ... --..-- / -- -.-- / -.. . .- .-. . ... - / -.-. .... . .-. .-. -.-- / -... .-.. --- ... ... --- -- .-.-.-". Dakota was legit. He actually cared a lot about me, more so than my own family at times. To hold me to this truth, he wrapped his arm around me as we started to walk away from it all. As long as I was with him, what just happened didn't matter anymore. I was finally going to be free. But, the fantasies of what could be lying just beyond the horizon came to a stop, when we were at the stairs, as Dakota signaled me to be quiet and pointed towards the front door.

Just outside, blocking our way out, stood officer Jerome and a woman wearing a long jacket and lanyard. I could tell right away she was a social worker, who came to ship me away like I was nothing more than an empty box on the back of a mail delivery truck. Dakota seemed just as worried about the social worker as I was, but seemed to be planning something out to avoid her altogether.

"Let me handle her," he whispered.

"Okay," I whispered. Dakota and I hurried down the stairs and went outside. Dakota leads the way so he would be the first to confront the social worker. As we got closer, we could hear officer Jerome stating his case to the social worker, trying to put things in our favor.

"I assure you that Frandsen is one of our most reliable resources for

cases like these. He will make sure Shandra is kept safe," he said.

"I have heard of Mr. Frandsen," she replied, "His name pops up in many cases that involve supernatural materials. Normally, I wouldn't allow your suggestions to be put through the system but under the circumstances, I can allow it. But before anything moves further I must know something. Why is it that he takes such a personal approach to this particular case?"

Dakota and I made it out of the front door and stood just behind the social worker. To make himself look more professional, Dakota tucked his arms behind his back.

"It is because I happen to go to school with Shandra," Dakota added. The social worker turned to face us, surprised at Dakota's gesture.

"It is nice to finally meet you," she said, "I have heard a lot about what you do."

"I hope that the word about me is good."

"Don't worry. Other than your behavior towards your father's case, you have a pretty good standing."

'What is she talking about?' I thought to myself.

"Well, wouldn't you be a little worried about people that didn't get angry considering what he did?" Dakota asked.

"I know, I know," she answered, "It was disgusting when the test results confirmed the allegations. But are you sure you want to handle this case? There are lots of foster homes that can take care of her."

"I am sure. But if I let you start treating her like cargo, you will lose her. Plus once foster care hasn't been linked to almost all heavy criminal offenders, then I would consider it a safe option."

'Wow, is this really happening?' I thought to myself.

"Understood," she said, "I see you are pretty locked in your decision. The notes in your profile about you being stubborn aren't an exaggeration. Be sure to take good care of her. But don't even think about trying anything, there will surveillance monitoring your house 24/7 and I will personally be coming in to inspect the premises."

"I understand, other than a couple busted door hinges that were there before I moved in you will find everything will be suitable. Now if you'll excuse me."

I started to follow Dakota to his car until he was stopped by the social worker when she put her hand on his shoulder.

"I hope you know what you're doing," she whispered to him. "Don't worry," he replied, "You would be surprised how much people begin to trust you when they realize that you can take away their nightmares inside of hiding from them."

Seeing that it was going to be impossible for her to convince Dakota in

any other direction, she moved her hand away and let us pass. As we walked away from my house, it seemed like everyone was fixated on us. Dakota seemed to ignore them as we got to his car and he loaded my bag into the backseat. I tried to open the passenger side door, but the handle wouldn't budge. Dakota saw that I was having trouble and jerked the door open.

He stood holding while I crawled into the seat and laid back. All I wanted to do from that point forward, was sleep. Dakota's silence during the drive home showed that he knew and respected that I was simply tired from the day's events. I tried to catch a quick snooze during the ride, but flashes of the torture my mom and I felt for years kept popping into my mind. It was like there was still a part of me that wanted to stay alert. Dakota must've seen that I was having problems as he set his hand on my leg and gently squeezed. Somehow, he was able to make the flashes disappear. He took his hand off of my leg so he could turn into the driveway of an old house just across the street from an old, foggy cemetery.

“So this is where you live?” I asked.

“Yeah, it's an alright place. You will like it here,” he answered.

“I can already tell. But how is the bath?”

“Comfortable. It has been a while since I have last used it but it should be just perfect for you.”

'Do you fit?' I joked to myself, “Great, I could definitely use one.”

“I could only imagine. I'll get your bag for you.”

We both got out of the car at the same time and walked up to the house. Dakota took the lead, after he grabbed my bag, and opened up the door. Inside the house, I could hear the sounds of bubbles popping inside of a fish tank. As I went inside, I looked around to just to get a feel for the place. I honestly expected the entire house to be covered with arcade games, toys, and posters with half-naked models. But I was actually greeted with something that looked like a home that was used as an office as well. Somehow, out of everything that happened, the first thing I noticed was a thirty-inch flat screen with several game consoles hooked into it.

“All of them are working if you want to hop on sometime,” said Dakota when he noticed what I was looking at.

“Good,” I smiled, “But can I ask you where the bathroom is? I really should take a bath.”

“Yeah just head upstairs and go to the second door on the right. The bedroom is through the first door right at the top of the stairs,” he answered.

“Thank you.”

I grabbed my bag and made my way up the stairs. The staircase was narrow. Just at the top of the stairs was a room that looked like an office. The hallway immediately turned towards the left, making a u-turn. The door to the bathroom was cracked open just enough for me to see the sink and a large mirror

that revealed the tub. As I went inside the room, I couldn't help but imagine Dakota laying down to take a bath with very little success.

'Yep,' I thought to myself, *'He is too big for it'*

When I set my bag on the counter, by the sink, and started to get out a pair of pajamas with a teddy bear pattern I heard Dakota start moving in and out of the house, silently grunting as if he was carrying something heavy. When I turned on the faucet and took off my clothes, the sound of the rushing water drowned out the sounds from downstairs.

As I waited for the tub to fill, I took my hand and pressed it against every part of my body that felt like it was bruised. I could still feel the pain on my stomach, to my arms, to my thighs, and to my breasts and nose. But instead of it feeling fresh, they all felt like they had been healing for weeks and were just on the verge of getting better. The warm water in the tub felt like it was trying to finish the healing process as it reached out its many arms to hold my body in. Feeling too relaxed to move, I used my toes to turn off the faucet and just laid there in the tub and ignored the entire world.

“You look comfy, mommy,” whispered a very familiar little girl. Hearing Olivia's voice made me just to cover my chest. As splashes of water smacked against the tile floor, Olivia appeared standing right next to the tub.

“Sorry to scare you!” she shrieked.

“It's okay, honey,” I told her, “It is nice to finally see you.”

“I would've come sooner. But the person who helps me come back to see you and daddy said that I needed to stay away from the bad parts,” Olivia explained.

“Oh really?” I asked, “Who is helping you?”

“Aunt Jessica. She is a special type of doctor in the future!”

“Jessica?” I whispered, “Does she have a sister named Brianna?”

“Yes, she does. But I only see her at night sometimes. No one else but Daddy acts like they can see her.”

A loud thud against the wall, coming from downstairs, startled us both.

“Dakota is everything alright?” I yelled.

“Yeah,” he answered, “I was just bringing in a few things from the car.”

“Daddy was working last night,” Olivia clarified.

“Okay,” I shouted to Dakota. Dakota started to carry something up the stairs and into the room next to the bathroom. As soon as he would set something down, he would hurry back downstairs to grab something else. He made a total of four trips, going up and down the stairs before he settled down and started to unzip several bags.

“He has a lot of tools for his work,” Olivia said.

"Yeah, I can tell," I sighed, "So why are you here?"

"Just to make sure you knew that you found Daddy," she answered before disappearing.

I laid back, somehow surprised at Olivia's confirmation of my suspicions. I thought finding out was going to be some long, perilous journey through time to solve an ultimate, mind-tearing question. But it was surprisingly easy to answer it.

"Dakota is the one," I said, *'But does that mean something else is going to happened?'*

PROOF

Chapter 20
Ghosts to Hunt

After about ten minutes, I pulled the plug from the drain and hurried out of the tub. I wanted to talk to Dakota about what was going on between us. I needed to know about what he did for a living, how he healed me, how did he know to come rescue me... I needed to know everything. I quickly dried off and slipped on my pajamas before I hurried to find Dakota. I knew he was in the office by the bathroom, so I popped into the doorway to find him working on a computer.

“Hey, can we talk?” I asked him.

“Of course,” he answered while gesturing towards a cot that was three feet from his desk, “Please, sit down.”

“You aren't too busy with... whatever you are doing?” I asked.

“No, I have at least four hours to copy over so I have plenty of time.”

'O...kay then,' I thought to myself as I took a seat on the cot, *'Alright, so how should I put this? Should I just be direct with him?'*

I let out a sigh, which seemed to tell him how nervous I was since his voice once again made its way into my brain.

'It is okay to ask me anything,' I heard his voice say, *'I'll be honest with you.'*

“What exactly is it that you do?” I finally asked him.

“Well my answer really depends on how much you understand,” he replied.

“It's just that... I don't know. You are so kind, then I see you literally

jump into my mind. You show me that you have your own business, then you end up helping cops in order to let me stay at your place. You have been so all over the place it is hard to keep track of everything. Like, how in the heck did you get the social worker to let me come with you?"

"I see," he giggled, "I guess it is fair I fill you in on everything."

As if to screw with me (which he was), Dakota lifted his hand and snapped his fingers to make it look like he triggered a screen saver to turn on. The screen itself showed three metallic letters, "P. R. F." moving around against a black background. I will admit it, he got me.

"I hope that you do," I told him while looking at the letters. Dakota titled his head back to think about what he was going to say. I could see that his mind was jumping to all sorts of places just to weave together some sort of story.

'Maybe you can start with how the social worker let you take me in without a fight?' I asked in my mind.

"You know, now that I think about it, I actually have no clue how it happened," he answered.

'Is he seriously reading my mind?' I asked, "Really? What about Officer Jerome? Wouldn't he know?"

"Why don't we give him a call?" he suggested, "He still might be at your house."

I nodded my head as Dakota quickly pulled out his smartphone started to scroll through his contact list. Once he found a spot that looked like it displayed Officer Jerome's name, he tapped his finger against his phone to call him and touched an icon to turn on speaker mode. The phone rang three times before someone answered.

"This is Officer 71349, Tracey Jerome," he announced.

"Jerry, it's me," Dakota said.

'Jerry?' I thought to myself, *'Why does he call him that?'*

"Dakota?" he asked, "Is everything okay with Shandra?"

"Everything is fine. I just needed to ask you something," Dakota answered. "Let me guess, you're wonderin' how I managed to convince the social worker to let you two stay together?"

Dakota and I simultaneously jumped when he guessed correctly.

"Actually," Dakota said, "Yes, that is what we were wondering."

"The social worker is my sister, Elisa. She owes me a few favors so I figured I cash them in. Don't say I haven't done anything for you."

"You have a sister in social services?" Dakota confusingly asked.

"Yep, and a twin brother who's a navy seal," he answered.

“Really? That explains a lot.”

“I hope it does because I need to go. The scene is wrapping up.”

“Alright, see ya.”

“Oh, and by the way, my sister will come by your place tomorrow afternoon just to check in. And don't worry, the paperwork is already blacked out.”

A clicking sound came from Dakota's phone to indicate Officer Jerome had hung up. Dakota pressed a button on the screen of his phone to lock it just before setting it down on his desk just before zoning out.

“Dakota... why did Jerry say 'the paperwork is already blacked out'?” I asked him before realizing he wasn't paying attention.

I had to start waving my hands in front of him to get him to respond.

“Hey Dakota, are you alright?” I asked.

“Yeah, sorry,” he answered, “I sometimes zone out when my mind tries to read a bit more into what is happening,”

“Oh, okay. I was just asking what Jerry meant by, 'the paperwork is blacked out.' Does he mean no one will know I am here?”

“Only people that would be stupid enough to only look through the paperwork would be clueless about where you are at.”

'What the heck does that mean?' I mentally screamed, “So how does that work?” I tried to dig more into how things were happening in order to keep from sounding rude.

“Before the file is even copied, parts of it are crossed out with a special black marker,” Dakota answered, “In your case, only enough information will remain to hint that you were put into a safe house. Just to make it looks better there will also be information about the surveillance you and I are placed under. Only the cops that were at the scene and the those that help social services keep an eye on us will know you are here.”

“So it's kinda like in the movies? Where a secret agent of the government looks through classified files?”

“Yeah, a little bit.”

I started to look around the room, specifically at the weird gadgets and equipment he had scattered around the room. The things I recognized immediately were either cameras or something out of crime scene shows.

“So, if you don't mind me asking, how is it that you got involved with all of this?” I asked him.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what was it that happened that lead you to start ghost investigating, or whatever it is that you do. Or how you came to helping cops? Something like that doesn't come up out of nowhere.”

"Yeah, I know what you mean and you are right. Somebody like me, hunting ghosts and chasing bad guys at the age of fifteen is unusual."

"So, how did it all start?"

Dakota took a few moments to think about his story. Once he took a deep breath he got started.

"Well, my interest in ghosts started when I was about nine. I was on a field trip to Boise to go visit the capitol building, a museum, and the old state pen. Well, when we went to the penitentiary something happened, something that I still have a hard time explaining. We went on this tour of the prison grounds just before a scavenger hunt, and right as the group passed the execution quarters, I started getting this weird feeling in my stomach," he said.

"Go on," I encouraged him. The look in his eyes screamed that he was starting to relive the tale. He swallowed before continuing on.

"It is hard to explain but it felt almost like this huge ball in my gut. It felt so heavy and almost nauseating to the point I had to drop to the floor. I tried shaking it off but had no luck. So I couldn't help but try to look around to see what was making me feel like that. It was also at that point I realized the group left me behind. But it didn't matter once I looked inside the execution quarters, where they hung people. The noose was on display, and I swore I saw this shadow hanging from it. It wasn't something that was against the wall, but the shadow was an actual body. Within seconds, I started noticing an actual person forming inside the shadow being. I could tell it was a man being hung, and he was choking.

"Soon I started feeling out of breath like something was choking me. I go to blink my eyes, but as soon as they opened back up I saw myself in another room. My hands were tied behind my back and a rope was around my neck. Somehow I was able to take the place of the man who was being executed. I even felt the rope tightening around my neck as the floor beneath me disappeared."

My eyes quickly grew as Dakota continued to tell his story. The details behind it were so unreal it was like he was from a completely different planet. Was this how life was going to be with him?

"Keep going," I pushed.

"It took some time before I went out. I was just hanging there, dangling a fish on a hook, being choked out in a time before I was even born. When I finally started to black out was when I popped back into my own body, coming off of one hell of an adrenaline high. I started bugging out, immediately thinking that someone was trying to commit suicide or something. I started screaming, trying to stop something that technically wasn't even happening. No one would believe me when I told them, not even people in my own family. It took me two years to find out who it was I saw," he added.

"Who was it that you saw?" I asked him.

“His name was Raymond Snowden. And for some reason, he wanted me to see something that day. At least that is what I made myself to believe just to make sense of it. I've always wanted to go back, just to see if I could see it happen again.”

“Why?”

“A killer took the time to show me something, wouldn't you be a little curious, still scared obviously but curious about why?”

“Yeah, I... guess,” I answered.

“He was executed for stabbing a woman to death, maybe there was something in me that he saw.”

“That is scary. But that doesn't explain everything else,” I said.

“I know and I apologize,” he replied, “I have a hard time explaining these details to people because there are about three different points that I could say were the influence behind how I got started. But they happened so long ago I barely remember them, other than the stories I have been told.”

“So what does that mean? Are you some sort of angel? Demon? God? Superhero? What?”

Dakota let out a slight chuckle at my seemingly random guess. “Actually the closest would be an unsung superhero of sorts, to be honest,” he joked.

“Well tell me. You have caught my interest.”

“In short, me working with the police and you healing that fast, among many other things, are the result of a time when I was murdered at the age of four. After a family argument of sorts, I was stabbed in the back of the neck. I don't remember much of what happened up to that point or who did it. All I do remember was being granted two alter-egos that brought me back to life and would help me get out of that situation. One of which helped me heal you when we kissed. The other likes to hunt down criminals and other things masked by the night and fight them off in every way possible if needed.”

“What else can you do?”

“Just about anything, really. Come here I will show you.”

Dakota lead me to a window that faced the street. It had a direct view of the foggy graveyard. Dakota took a moment to slide open the window and stuck his hand out.

“Fog can be quite creepy when it settles like that, don't you agree?” he asked.

'What does he mean?' I wondered.

His eyes closed as he took a deep breath. The very moment he exhaled, a wind gust came out of nowhere and cleared up the fog.

“How did you do that?” I asked him.

"The same way I can do this," he answered while cupping his hand together. In his hands, a bright red rose bloomed seemingly right through his palms.

"I can make the most amazing things happen, in the purest of ways, with nothing more than a thought mixed with love," he added, "Some say the source of my abilities were responsible for creation itself."

"That is amazing," I smiled. Dakota smiled as he became quiet. He stared directly into my eyes. The look I saw in his eyes was the same way I would catch him looking at the stars. I couldn't help but smile and blush.

"This is for you," he said handing me the rose.

"But Dakota, we haven't even gone on our first date yet," I told him. I always felt that flowers should wait until like the very first moments of the first date, just to make a good impression. Guys that pulled them out before then just seemed a bit desperate.

"Well," he sighed, "Maybe when my paycheck comes in on Friday we can fix that."

I carefully reached for the rose from Dakota's hand, just trying to avoid any thorns. But instead of just taking the rose, I felt like reaching my arms around him one more time. Each time I hugged him, my hands could barely touch each other.

"So what is it that you do for a living?" I asked him, "Other than the whole paranormal thing." I knew that the ghost hunters on television had other jobs since they never made anyone pay for them to come over. I thought that it would be the same for Dakota, especially since he didn't have any camera crews around him.

"I actually work several jobs," he answered, "I do a lot of graphic design, writing, and some voice over work. I do also get an occasional check from the city whenever I help the police with a case, but that is more of an occasional bonus."

"Really? How the heck did you get started on that living by yourself?"

"In short, I made a lot of good impressions at a young age and managed to work a few things out. I did everything I could to separate myself from my parents."

'Huh? What does he mean?' I asked myself. I was caught off guard when Dakota said he needed to separate himself from his parents. I honestly thought that no one could have had a worse family situation than my own. Maybe it was selfish, but at the time it didn't really add up.

"Why though?" I asked him while letting him go.

"I'll show you," he answered.

Dakota moved back to his computer and went online. I watched as he typed in the website for a news radio station in the area and started searching

through several articles. He stopped at one titled, “Local Man arrested for Sexual Assault to a Minor,” and pulled up the information. He moved his body to the side so I could get a better look.

“I have heard about him,” I said, “But what does that have to do with you?”

Dakota looked like he was embarrassed about the answer, and was afraid of what I would have to say. Honestly, after what he saw happened to me, I thought he would be more open about his own demons. But it looked like he was still fighting them, or maybe he was afraid of scaring me off once I knew the truth about him.

“That man... is my father,” he answered slowly, “And the child he hurt was my sister. The state put all of the kids he had with my stepmom into foster care.”

'What? He... is just like me!' I screamed in my mind. I thought I was alone with these types of demons, but Dakota was obviously dealing with ones much like my own. Was that why he came to me? Was that how he knew what would've happened if he let the social worker take me? Seeing that he was still fighting his battle, I had to go up and hug him to try to make him feel better.

“Did they at least let you visit the kids?” I asked him.

“No,” he answered as tears started to form in his eyes, “They didn't actually.”

“Why? You're their brother. You should be allowed to see them.”

“I know and I agree. But the system started to treat me like I was my father so they made sure I never was seen or heard from them.”

“Why? You didn't do anything, right?”

“In their eyes, I did something much worse,” he said, “I looked them right in the eye and told them that if my father ever came near me, I would kill him.”

'Oh my god, he has the voices too,' I said mentally.

Hearing Dakota speak in such a way made me somewhat afraid of him. I could just see the rage he held inside that was waiting to come out. My fear... was that I would accidentally do something to set it free. But I couldn't let myself be afraid, he was the one to take me from my own hell hole, I at least owed him the same favor.

“You don't mean it did you? You just said it out of anger?” I asked him.

“I did mean it. I still do. Regardless of the fact that he was my father, he still hurt someone I cared about. He hurt his own daughter. No matter what happened to me, killing him seemed like the best option for everybody,” he answered, “Yes I was angry. I was in a near rage that no one understood, not even people in my family. My own sister, the one who came forward about what my father was doing, used the fact I threatened our own father to torment me.

That honestly aggravated me beyond belief.

"Yet no one seemed to realize my brothers and sisters being taken into foster care on Christmas Day was the part that hurt the worse. I never even had the chance to meet my youngest sister who was about six months old at the time. My mother's side started saying that I shouldn't care about it, which is why I started doing as many jobs I could get my hands on in order to move out of the house. Hell, the only reason I stayed in Idaho was so I could be near my grandfather who is battling cancer."

'So that he why he was the one to help me,' I said while analyzing what he said, *'But what if none of that ever happened? Would he still come to help me? Would he even be able to?'*

Every, "What if" I could think of in the moment was pointless. It was obvious that the only reason he was around to help me because he was part of a situation that was a lot like mine.

"But I must admit that in a way I am somewhat glad this all happened. Otherwise, I probably wouldn't have been able to help you. If my family had their way, I would not be able to come around when I did. If something were to happen to you, I just don't know," he said quietly.

"What would you have done? We hardly know each other. You probably wouldn't pay much attention to it. Nobody would," I said.

"That is where you are wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"Shandra, I've already shown you some of the things I could do. Maybe what happened with my siblings was part of the reason they became stronger. I don't know," he answered, "But I think the reason we came together was that something meant for us to meet one way or another."

An idea popped into his head. He jumped out of his chair and hurried into the hallway, using his height to stretch his arms and press against the ceiling. As he moved forward, part of the ceiling quickly bounced open and a rope fell out that dangled from it. Dakota pulled on the rope to bring down a ladder which leads to a secret attic.

"Would you like to see more?" he asked. "Sure," I answered, "But what is up there?"

"I guess one could say that this is where my way of prayer becomes answered. Or perhaps the most useful library in the area."

"What do you mean?"

"Come on," he jerked his head in the direction of the attic, "I promise not to start acting like a religious extremist. People like that irritate me."

"Alright..." I was a bit confused about where Dakota was going with all of this, but I was interested to see what else he had to show off. So I slowly went up the ladder to check out what was upstairs. I guess you could say I was

expecting the cliché cobwebs and dusty boxes, but what I saw up there was amazing. I could see several different paintings, shelved filled with books, and several bowls filled with a bunch of necklaces with different designs. In the middle of the room stood a wooden altar. Dakota followed closely behind me as the ladder creaked under his weight.

"This is my own personal library for the supernatural. Anything from ghosts, to monsters, to supernatural powers. Ever since I met Olivia, I've been trying to find something that explains how it could be possible..." he said, "Shandra, is everything alright?" My attention was captured by a painting that was to the north side of the house. It looked like it depicted several women dressed in golden armor, armed with spears and swords. They all had golden wings but were flying on some sort of objects that resembled horses. Something about that painting looked awfully familiar.

"Yeah, it's just... I think I recognize this painting," she answered.

"Maybe you have seen it in a magazine," he suggested.

"No, it's not that," I said, "I think I am IN this painting."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"That woman in the painting, the one in the far back, is me!"

One of the women looked an awful lot like me. It was almost like staring at a picture of myself posing in a faceless image board.

"What do you know about this painting?" I asked Dakota.

"Not much. The story goes that this painting was found in a German museum's old archives, but they all believed it was fake despite it being about two-hundred years old. So they simply sold it off to a distant cousin of mine who brought it to me when he started to develop a theory on time travel."

"Time travel? Where does he get that idea?"

"Well just take a closer look at the grounds below. The Warriors are actually fighting with relatively modern guns. In fact, some of them look like they are in jungle camouflage. Which may not seem weird until you look closely."

"How so?" Dakota went to a table that was next to the altar and grabbed a magnifying glass. He placed it over a warrior that was standing in the brightest spot on the ground.

"Notice how the pattern looks almost pixelated?" he asked. "Yeah, I see what you are getting at. It looks like army camouflage. But how is that possible?"

"Well, the time travel theory does kinda stand. But truthfully, that theory doesn't click very well with me."

"How so?"

"Well first off, this is depicting beings from Norse mythology overseeing a relatively modern battlefield. It is hard to tell because of the way

the piece aged, but the warriors actually use what look like modern rifles. Even if the Valkyries were real, it would be very odd. There is an old story that tells that the Pagan gods left because the majority of the human population converted to Christianity. So assuming that is true to some extent, why would they be back?" he asked, "Huh... that is interesting."

"Well maybe something will or did happen to make them come back," I suggested, "Because I know it sounds crazy but I swear that Valkyrie is me!"

"I can see why you would think that, but I just noticed something. And if my eyes aren't just playing tricks on me, and what you are saying is, in fact, the truth, we might actually be a big part of it."

Dakota reached out and pointed to the right bottom corner of a painting, where a faint symbol could be seen. It looked slightly distorted, probably to form itself to the ground, but it looked like some sort of sideways eye with something that looked like a hurricane in the place of the pupil. The eye was enclosed in a large circle, making it look like some sort of seal.

"What is that?" I asked Dakota.

"It may just be a coincidence, but that looks an awful lot like the symbol I designed for my ghost hunts. And..." he said, "Now that I am looking at it there looks like there are people within the symbol."

Dakota and I both looked closer at the symbol and found that there was someone standing inside of it. In fact, there were three people, all looking nearly identical. They all were dressed in a long coat and appeared to be wearing fedora-like hats. The only difference between the three, other than their poses, were the colors of their clothing. One was in all black. The second one, standing in the middle of the three, was dressed in a shiny gray colored uniform. The third was in all white. They each seemed to be important to the other, like they were close brothers.

I swear I could see them guarding people, but that part of the painting was too dark to make out many details. But lying in a pool of blood, next to the three men, was another man that looked surprisingly familiar.

"Hey," I said poking Dakota on the shoulder, "Does that dead guy lying next to the symbol look familiar?"

"Huh, that actually looks a bit like my buddy Marcus," he answered.

"I know this sounds weird, maybe not to you, but is there a chance that I could be that Valkyrie?"

"Maybe. The Norse believed that our souls could be reincarnated. Maybe you are one of the incarnated versions of her soul."

"I don't know," I said starting to feel overwhelmed, "Is there a way to check?"

Dakota put his finger and thumb against his chin as he thought about my question. I could see in his eyes that he was putting something together.

"There are a few ways that it can be done," he said, "But some are rather complex if you don't know what you are doing."

"Really?" I asked, "Can I try one?"

"Yes of course," he said, "I think there might be one way, but it might not let you go that far back."

"What do you mean?" Dakota walked over to the shelves full of books and began running his fingers across the rows. As soon as he came to one he was looking for, I could hear a loud thud come from his hand.

"Astral Projection," he said.

'Okay, now this is getting weird,' I thought, "I didn't think that was real."

"It is very real, otherwise the military wouldn't have tried to experiment with it back in the seventies."

"Tried? Did something go wrong?"

"In their eyes, yes. The project got shut down back in 1995 because of very few results. There were successful attempts but those who managed to do it burnt out."

"Burnt out?!" I said, "What happened to them?"

"The military didn't have enough patience to allow its subjects to properly develop, so many of them simply became too exhausted. Almost like getting sore after a rough first day at the gym."

I started to rub my arm when he mentioned gym. Despite me being surprisingly skinny, I hardly ever worked out.

"If it hurts I don't think I want to do it," I joked.

"Don't worry," he said, "I won't put you through that. You might get a bit of a headache at most but it usually goes away in a couple minutes."

"Okay, I am going to trust you." Dakota took a few moments to grab out a book and start skimming through it. Once he found a page, he quickly read the details to himself before continuing to talk to me.

"Here," he said, "I think I may have a way we can put you under without having any problems."

"Put me under? You need drugs in order to do it?" I asked him.

"No, that was where the government went wrong. The only drugs we use are what we are born with. We just need to adjust the levels to get you in the right state."

"What state?"

"The only way we can do this without it hurting you. Serenity."

'Serenity? How the heck is I supposed to feel that way after what happened today?' I thought to myself.

“Do you still want to do this?” he asked.

“I am too curious not to try,” I answered.

“That is all I needed to know.” Dakota slid the book back into the empty slot then walked over to me. He looked like he was still trying to decipher something before he said anything else to me.

“So what do we need to do?” I asked him.

“Well, why don't you just find a place comfortable to rest downstairs,” he said, “I am going to grab something that will help set your mind at ease.”

“Cool. I am getting a bit tired.”

Following Dakota's directions, I slowly went down the ladder to go downstairs. The first place that came to mind to get comfortable at was in his bedroom. A Viking-sized guy like Dakota must've had a queen sized mattress at least. Sure enough, I found a large king size and immediately tucked myself underneath the sheets.

As I crawled underneath the sheets, I noticed a blue and white blanket on his bed that just had a different feel to it. No, not the feeling from the fabric. The blanket itself felt like it was a gift from someone important. I didn't notice any special about the pattern, other than it was a picture of a grizzly bear standing on a mountainside on both sides. I was too tired to really care, and despite it being only five in the afternoon, I went straight to sleep.

As I was drifting off, and my body quickly became numb, I could hear Dakota walk into the room. He walked over to each window to close the curtains, making the room darker. The metal loops on the second curtain were loud enough to slightly pull me out of sleeping mode.

“What is going on?” I moaned. Dakota crouched down to meet me... somewhat at my eye level. As my eyes were falling asleep themselves, they made Dakota look blurry.

“It's alright,” he answered, “I am just getting it dark for you.”

“Oh thank you. Sorry about falling asleep.”

“Don't be. Dreams can sometimes help look into the past. Maybe with the thought of looking into your past life, your dreams will do all of the work for us.”

“Kinda like how sometimes dreams show the future?”

“In a way, yes. It takes much more in order to go back in time, but considering what you have been through you will be able to...” That is all I remember hearing. I fell right back asleep as Dakota was talking. But part of me was still awake just enough to feel Dakota's lips as he kissed the back of my hand. He had slowly lifted it off of the bed in order to do it, but as he was setting it back down I pulled my hand next to my face so the spot he kissed would lay right against my cheek.

After that, I am pretty sure I stayed smiling while I was asleep. I don't

remember any major dreams taking place that night, except for one. I remember opening my eyes and finding myself in a strange room. The walls looked like they were made of nothing but sand. I tried to get up, but my arms and legs were chained to the bed. I started to become more aware of my surroundings, especially my clothes. I was dressed in nothing but a black dress-type thing. But what I was wearing didn't matter as strange shadows started to surround me.

They each looked to be twelve feet tall. At first, they were silent. Then they each started mocking me as they flew around me. I could see faces made out of oozing blood appear all over their bodies. I screamed to the top of my lungs, but I couldn't make a sound. It seemed like I was screaming for hours before something happened. A loud roar and a quickly growing earthquake emerged out of nowhere. Through the shadows, I saw two people appear. One was a large man who looked ready to tear apart an army, the other was a concerned little girl.

“Daddy! Help Mommy!” the child screamed. The man let out one final roar, which caused the shadows to quickly stir together above me. As the man quickly approached me, the shadows beings merged into one tiny pebble which dropped to my chest. Before the man could notice anything, the dark pebble sank into my skin, burning a path into it. My whole body felt like it was set on fire and started to shake like I was about to die. The dress I was wearing was sliding off my body, revealing that nothing was underneath. The man didn't seem to care as he ran up to me. It felt like he was trying to get me to calm down but I couldn't pay any attention to him.

“Shandra!” he shouted, “Shandra, wake up!”

“Oh my god, Dakota!” I screamed.

The chains I was held in finally disappeared, allowing me to jump up and reach my arms around Dakota. My entire body started to shiver.

“It's okay,” he said, “It was nothing more than a dream.”

“No, it wasn't. It was real. It was too real. Please don't go!” I cried.

I tightened my arms around him so he couldn't. But both of us were very tired, being it was the middle of the night, so we slowly fell into bed together. Somehow my head laid against his surprisingly soft chest. It felt like I was a little kid hugging a gigantic teddy bear.

“I won't ever go,” he whispered, “I will always be around when you need me.”

“What if something happens to you?” I asked.

“Shandra, if you ever need me and I am not there, look to the stars. My mind has always been there, so it is only a matter of time before my body decides to join.”

I gave him a slight smile before slowly drifting further into sleep. To help me relax, Dakota started to use his index finger to massage my temple by drawing a heart over and over again. Soon, I began to feel a tiny body lying

between us.

"Goodnight," Olivia whispered.

"Good night," Dakota and I said in unison.

From that moment on, I remember nothing but the image of the three of us just laying together. A sense of family. This was my new life, one that I didn't have to worry about fighting. One I didn't have to worry about whether or not I was going to make it through the night. Even though I had just met Dakota, I trusted him more than anyone else. The next morning, Dakota and I both woke up at the same time. He started to look around the room like he was trying to remember what happened the night before.

"Morning, Dakota," I moaned.

"Morning. How did you sleep?" he asked.

"Better after you came in."

"Good. I am glad I could help." I opened up my eyes further to get a better look at him. Since I was just waking up, my vision was still a little blurry, but it was finally able to adjust itself. I started to wonder about how something like the dream we both had that night was possible.

"So what happened last night?" I asked him.

"What do you remember?"

"Not much. I remember getting trapped by these weird shadows. Then after a little girl cried out, you came in and the shadows disappeared."

"That's weird. I remember seeing all of that."

"Weird for you? That is a little ironic coming from someone like you."

"Yeah. But a lot of things have been changing lately so anything is possible."

"So what does it mean?"

"Usually a dream like that means something important is coming."

"Like our daughter?"

Dakota's eyes nearly jumped out of his head. Apparently, he hadn't quite put together that the little girl that was just laying in bed with us was indeed our little girl.

"Do you think she had anything to do with it?" I asked him.

"For the dream?" he asked, "No, but I do think she is a big part of it. Plus, why would a six-year-old try to show us something that looked like it was taking placed in Egypt."

"This is all too confusing. First, she saves my life, but she never tells me why she did it."

"Really? Is that how you met her?"

“I don't really want to talk about it right now.”

“I get it. But, if it does make things easier, she did save me as well...” Surprise, surprise, my growling stomach decided to interrupt Dakota. I squeezed my eyes shut while my cheeks turned bright red as we both laughed. I was so embarrassed. Plus my high pitched laughter, many people said sounded like a baby, made me even more embarrassed.

“I am so sorry,” I said.

“Don't be,” Dakota replied between laughs, “How about I go make us some breakfast and then we will talk about it?”

“Yeah, I would like that. What is on the menu?”

“How about some pancakes?”

“I'd love some.”

“Cool. Then how about I bring it back up so you and I can have breakfast in bed?”

“I'd like that.”

Dakota leaned forward to give me a kiss just before getting out of bed. Just to thank him for breakfast, I snuck in one small peck on his lips. Right as he got up, he made just enough of a bounce to launch me a couple inches into the air. To be honest, it was kinda fun. That, and Dakota doing some sort of goofy dance as he went down the stairs was enough to make me giggle uncontrollably. I thought I heard another girl laughing in the room as well, but I simply brushed it off. For the ten minutes Dakota was downstairs, sorting through pots and pan while he was cooking, I simply laid back on the bed and let the smell of pancakes torture me.

There were times while he was cooking I could've sworn he was talking to someone else but I didn't pay much attention to it. It was just nice to not be ordered around by some asshole trying to be a drill sergeant just to get breakfast. No offense to military families, but I had my reasons. Somehow, right as thoughts of Greg started to creep their way back into my mind, Dakota appeared at the door with a tray. The tray held a plate with a huge stack of pancakes and two glasses of orange juice.

“Pancakes and some orange juice, my lady,” he announced using an English butler voice.

I sat up impressed at the gesture. Dakota's impersonation was spot on, and the pancakes looked fluffier than anyone else's batch.

“Oh, why thank you, my dear!” I replied in an English accent. Dakota smiled and laughed at my impersonation. I loved that I was able to get him to laugh. It meant that he actually enjoyed my company, rather than pretend like other guys. And also unlike other guys, Dakota had cooked a very delicious smelling of pancakes that couldn't have come quicker. As soon as he set the tray down; I swiped half the stack, a fork, and a plate in one swoop of my arms and started eating. I must've caught Dakota a bit by surprise.

"Looks like you have quite an appetite," he joked, "Are they good at least?" I swallowed the large chunks of pancake I had in my mouth before talking.

"Yes, these are delicious!" I said.

"Good."

"So are you ready to talk about how you met Olivia?" "Yeah, just give me a sec." I held up my index finger to get Dakota to give me a moment to just swallow. When I let my hand drop, I was ready to talk... surprisingly.

"Well, it started when my mom met my dad after he got back from the war just, after I turned thirteen," I sighed, "He got really violent with me and my mom. I started blaming myself for everything that would happen and I just had enough."

"Let me guess," he said, "You tried to hang yourself but something made you stop before you'd do it."

"Yeah! Then this bright blue light surrounded me when this man appeared. After he spoke to me, he simply stepped aside to show me that someone was wanting to see me. That was when I saw Olivia for the first time. Ever since then I see her at the most random times, but lately, I have been seeing her around you."

"That pretty much describes how I met her."

"Yeah well until recently she has been freaking me out! Every time I tried asking her about where she is from she either giggled or would disappear."

Sure enough, the evil little shit starts laughing when we started to talk about her. Olivia sounded like she was in the room with us at the time, but I couldn't see her.

"See what I mean?" I said.

"Yeah I see," Dakota smiled, "Good to know now that our child is slightly evil."

'But how does she fit into all of this?' I asked myself.

"Honestly, I don't think the answer to that has yet to make itself known," Dakota answered while placing his hand on my shoulder and locking his eyes onto mine, "But it is obvious whatever is coming needed her to bring us together. Since that has happened we will be able to find out what is going on."

"You think?"

"Yes. Whatever happens, we will take it on together."

I set my fork down and set my hand on top of his.

"I know," I whispered, "But can we change the subject? This all is getting to be a bit overwhelming."

"Sure thing," he said, "Is there anything you want to do today?"

“Well, there is this movie I've been waiting to see, but it doesn't come out until Thursday,” I answered.

“Oh? Which one?”

“I think it is called 'Death is Not the End.' I saw the previews for it a couple days ago and thought it looked pretty good. But since it is more of a chick movie, it is okay if you don't want to see it with me.”

Dakota smiled from ear to ear, like he was hiding a big secret from me. Whatever that secret was almost looked like it was going to spill each time he took a bite of his pancakes.

“Oh, I think I'll join you,” he said

“Alright, cool! But what is with that look on your face?” I asked.

“Oh, nothing really,” he answered, “I may have had a hand in helping make the movie.”

My eyes jumped. Yet another wonderful surprise fact about Dakota was unfolding.

“How so?” I asked.

“I actually wrote the original screenplay as part of a contest,” he answered.

“Really?”

“Yeah, of course, the script was altered a bit since the studio took over, “ he said, “But the movie is still my baby.”

“Wow, Dakota, that is really cool!”

“It's nothing,” he said, “I honestly didn't think it was going to go very far.”

“Well you should be proud it did, that is something few people get to do!”

“I know, plus I should consider it a blessing since...”

Three knocks on the front door downstairs interrupted Dakota before he could finish. We both looked at his alarm clock to see that it was only “8:24” in the morning.

'Who could that be?' I asked myself mentally.

'Probably the social worker from yesterday,' Dakota telepathically answered, “I'll go see.”

“I'll be honest, you doing that is freaking me out,” I said as he started to walk away.

Dakota started going down the stairs but turned his head to speak.

“Well, just to warn you now, it is only going to get worse the longer we are together,” he laughed.

'That is going to be interesting.'

I listened as Dakota went to answer the door. I could barely hear what he was saying, but by the sound of him laughing, it was all going well.

"So Mrs. Rose, why don't you come on upstairs? Shandra and I were just enjoying a little breakfast in bed," he said.

"Alright. Again I am sorry for stopping in so early. I have so many places I need to check in today so I'd thought I'd get you two out of the way," Elisa said.

"Oh, it is alright! Like I said she had a bit of a rough night but it was taken care of."

"Well good. I figured that she might have a rough start to things considering what happened."

I saw Dakota and the social worker appear at the top of the stairs. They both seemed awfully calm under the circumstances. I was actually caught off guard at the fact the social worker, who showed up at my house, didn't have any sort of clipboard or anything.

"Hello, Shandra," Mrs. Rose said, "How are you feeling today?"

"A little better, now that I've eaten a bit," I answered.

"Good," she turned her head to Dakota, "Can you give us a minute?"

"Sure thing," he answered. He then turned to face me and smiled, *'I'll be downstairs doing... something, if you need me.'*

I smiled and said, *'Okay.'*

Dakota started to walk downstairs as Mrs. Rose came into the bedroom and shut the door. My heart started to race a bit when she did that. I started to feel short of breath. My body was starting to lock itself up like it was sensing another attack from Greg.

"It is okay, Shandra, I just wanted to keep this conversation between us," Mrs. Rose explained, "Now please be honest, has Dakota been treating you well?"

"Well, yeah. Last night he came to check on me after I was having a nightmare, and this morning he made us breakfast."

"The nightmare, did it happen to look like it was in Egypt by any chance?"

'WHAT THE HELL?!' I mentally screamed. My eyes grew inside my head. How in the HELL did she know that? "How did you know that?" I asked her.

"Well... let's just say that me coming here is more of a favor to an old friend of mine rather than being a scheduled visit from a social worker."

"What do you mean?"

"Your father, and I mean your real father Ronald, wanted me to keep an eye out for you should anything happen to him."

My jaw dropped as tears began to build up in my eyes. "You... you knew my dad?"

"Yep. We were in the same unit over in Iraq. He and I were actually good friends."

"Well, what can you tell me about him?"

"Only the most important thing, that he loved you so much he literally had a dream that told him you were going to be in some sort of danger a week before he died."

"What kind of dream?"

"Well," she said taking a seat on the bed, "It is kinda hard to explain."

"Tell me, please," I pleaded, "I need to know."

Mrs. Rose took a deep breath and began telling the story. "Your dad and I were in charge of monitoring radar systems around the base in case of any surprise attacks. Your dad was my superior and my trainer. He and I got along fairly well, at least I would think we did for a good while," she said.

"Did something happen?" I asked her.

"Yeah, something did happen," she answered, "I'm not exactly sure what though."

"Tell me!"

"Alright, alright," she said, "Anyway every now and then your father would personally investigate any strange readings our gear picked up. Most of the time, it was minor environmental factors that could happen at any time. A bird carrying a piece of metal, maybe a civilian aircraft that went off course, heck there was a time when a solar flare messed up a few lines."

"But I thought that those were supposed to be built a certain way to prevent that?"

"They are, but human error can sometimes miss certain details. Anyway, about two months before your dad wad killed those weird readings started to happen more frequently, too frequently to brush off. So your father would actually go and investigate the cause without a word to the rest of us. Every time he would go, there was always a certain woman that followed him.

"No one knew much about her since she didn't talk much. We knew that her last name was Grey, but truth be told it also became a bit of a nickname for her. Her skin was this palish gray color all the time. And her eyes looked like she was a real life Japanese anime character because they were so big.

"Anyway, whenever they came back they looked so stressed out they became walking skeletons. Your father looked the worse, while Grey just looked like she was hungry. Eventually, he started acting like he was hallucinating, and at night the entire base could hear him scream in his sleep. We all got very

worried, and many of us tried to reach a handout, but our higher-ups kept getting in the way to keep everyone silent. After this had gone on for a while, about a week before his last operation, he opened up to me about a recurring dream that was the reason behind his night terrors."

"Was it about me?"

"Yes, it was," she answered, "He told me that just about every time he closed his eyes he would see the same two images over and over again. In his words, the first image he saw was you chained up like a piece of meat, wearing nothing but a black cloth, and covered in bruises and blood and broken bones. Now that I think about it, you probably looked like what you did yesterday. He would then say that a bolt of bright blue lightning would appear out of nowhere, striking you. You would then be wrapped up in some sort of red cocoon that would slowly turn gold. And as you would come out, you changed into something extraordinary."

"What?"

"He couldn't say. But all of the sudden he would see you as a strong, young, beautiful woman dressed in golden armor. You would draw out your sword and golden wings would come out of your back. And instead of you being alone, the image of three men appeared right at your side. He said that the three men looked exactly alike except the clothes they were wearing were different colors. One was in all black. One was in shiny silver. And the third one was in all white. They each looked like they were ready to fight by your side."

"What could that mean?"

"I'm not sure, to be honest, but your father was convinced that it meant something horrible was going to happen to you and because of it, you would become something stronger when someone came to help you."

"Do you think, that the three men, are Dakota?"

"Actually, yes. Perhaps it was also a reflection of different sides to him. You see Dakota's past left him with a mild case of dissociative identity disorder. When he was younger, he use to claim there were at least six people living inside him but three that always remained dominant. From his files, these three seemed to work together; one the healer and protector, one that was a monster, and the third being a mediator between the two.

"But I'm getting too off course. Your dad knew that something was going to happen hat is why your dad wanted me to keep my eyes on you in case he wasn't around anymore."

"What did happen to him?"

"Well, the official report says he died in an explosion, but the truth is a lot of us in our unit aren't buying it. I can't say much about it, but there was a lot that doesn't add up. That and Grey disappeared around the same time with no paper trail of her even being born."

"So you're saying... my dad... he's alive?"

“Maybe, and into something deep if he is. I know this is a lot to take in, and don't be afraid to talk to Dakota about this. Now, with everything that happens, I think he going to be a big part of your life no matter what happens.”

'Oh you have no idea,' I said to myself.

Mrs. Rose took a second to grab out her phone and check the time. She then pulled out a business card from her coat and handed it over to me.

“But just in case you feel that there is something you can't talk with him about, anything at all, you go ahead and give me a call,” she said. I took the card and said, “Okay, thanks.”

“No problem, anyway I should get going. I'll be back in about a week to check up on things.”

“How is my mom doing?”

“She is doing alright. She didn't take any major injuries. But before you can go back home, she will need to get some help to clean up the place.”

“Will I at least get to talk to her?”

“She will probably give you a call later tonight. I told her it was probably best to give you some time to relax and wrap your head around everything. And that you would be kept in a safe place until further notice, given the circumstances.”

“I just don't want anything like it to happen again.”

“Don't worry, honey, Dakota's got a way of maying problems go away. To be honest, I know I probably shouldn't be putting it this way, but that big goofball won't allow else happen to you or die trying,” she said, “There are unseen forces watching over both of you.”

“I thought you were slapping 24/7 surveillance on Dakota?”

“It was just a little something to make sure he keeps his act together,” she grinned, “He may have abilities and be classy about it but he's still a teenage boy.”

“Got it.”

Mrs. Rose stood up and started to leave the room. I set the empty tray aside and followed her as she went downstairs. She didn't say a word until she found Dakota working on the computer.

“Well Mr. Frandsen, it looks like everything checks out. I will be back in a week just to check up on you two,” she said just before walking out the door.

“Well alright,” Dakota said, “See you.”

Dakota got off of his computer to close the door behind Mrs. Rose. Once he turned the locks, he turned to face me with a smile but it turned sour once he saw that something was on my mind.

“Hey,” he said, “Is everything okay?”

"Yeah," I answered, "Just heard something I'd never thought could be possible."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really."

"Okay," he replied. Dakota didn't take the conversation any further. I could tell that he was just wanting to give me my space, but I wanted to spill this new secret to him so badly. So as he started to go upstairs, my mind decided to blow the whistle.

'Elisa just said that there is a chance my real father is still alive,' I screamed.

Dakota jerked his head towards me and replied, *'What do you mean?'*

"She was telling me that a bunch of people, think my real dad didn't die over in Iraq."

Dakota and I both sat down on the couch and talked for what seemed like hours about what Mrs. Rose told me about my father. He suggested several ideas on what could be going on if any truth was behind the idea. It seemed like he was offering twisted versions of conspiracy movies at the time, but I knew he was just trying to help out. But in the end, there was something he said that captured it perfectly.

"Honestly Shandra, it looks like you have your own ghosts to hunt now," he said.

"Yeah, no kidding," I giggled, "But does it get any easier?"

"From my experience, it all depends on what happens. At one point it could look like you are close to the answer, only to find even bigger questions that would be harder to crack. Or you may find one small detail that was overlooked and causes the everything you know to crumble. Or you may just find a combination of the two," he answered.

"So in short, it doesn't?"

"Pretty much, but that is just the nature of the beast. Something that a lot of people don't get, is that the search for answers often lasts longer than the lives of those who brought up the questions. And because of that, they assume that everything they know is all that they need."

"Yeah, I guess so. I just wish there was some way to make just thinking about this easier."

"Well, you could always try to do what I do when I get writer's block. Just push the problem to the back of your mind and let it do its own thing for a while."

"What do you mean?"

"Whenever I get writer's block, I just jump to something else to help get my mind off of it. Then, after a while, I am able to jump right back in."

"Is there anything you suggest?"

"How about I take you out to lunch? Anything you are in the mood for, I'll take you there. We can just talk about anything else, and we will see if anything comes up."

"Sounds good. There is this one deli place that has been around for a while I've always wanted to try. But it is a bit outside of town."

"You mean that one place just off the highway, past the church?"

"Yeah, you know it?" "I should, considering I knew the owners since I was seven. They're old family friends. They got some good stuff."

"Oh! Well, cool! Then I guess it's a date! Is there anything you can't do?"

PROOF

Chapter 21
Back to School

Dakota smiled as I excitedly ran back up the stairs and started to get ready for our date. I quickly got in and out of the shower just so Dakota could get himself ready. Apparently, in the time that I was taking a shower and getting changed, Dakota decided to start packing up the car with a few supplies in order to give me one more surprise. I heard him shuffling around the house, grabbing things, so naturally, I had to ask him what was going on. He just kept saying that it was a surprise for later. Sure enough, he did have a surprise for me and was surprisingly good about keeping it from me until last minute.

After we got the food, and Dakota introduced me to the deli owners, he had me stash our food in a cooler that was in the trunk of his car (somehow my mind didn't register the cooler as a hint). Then he took me on a twenty-minute drive to a large lake out in the middle of nowhere. There were boat docks and RV parking spots, but the place was deserted as far as we could tell. It wasn't until we parked and Dakota lifted the large cooler and a large blanket that I finally realized that the surprise was a lunch picnic by the lake. I was so surprised when it finally registered. I loved it!

It was all so calm, so peaceful, yet so romantic (Dakota suggested that the only thing that could make it better was if it was a warm summer night and he could watch the Northern Lights dance in my eyes). As we ate, we just talked about everything there was to know about each other and more. Soon afterward Dakota somehow managed to convince me to join him as he slipped off his shirt, pants, shoes, and socks and started swimming in the lake.

Occasionally his body would jerk around and he would start laughing. Turns out the fish decided to join us, which somehow made everything feel more special. The only thing that would've made it better was if our little girl

decided to join us. Sure enough, she found a way to give us a jump when we allowed our bodies to float on top of the water. Thankfully we both knew how to get our balance back, but it was still a pleasant surprise that our little terrorist came around.

Olivia went on us stories about our future selves going out and playing just like we just were. It gave both Dakota and I the greatest feeling knowing that the good times were still ahead. We also welcomed it with a long kiss that seemed to stop the world once again. After about four hours we both decided it was time to go home. At first, I wanted to smack Dakota for having us drive all the way soaking wet and still in our underwear, but he saved himself after he pulled out a couple towels. We each gathered our clothes and got dressed in the bathrooms by the camping area, each of us laughing at how silly we looked. When we finally packed up to leave, I noticed a text message was on my phone that I left in the glove compartment. Turns out it was someone who I hadn't talked to in a long time.

'Hey, girl <3 Just saw you heading towards Murtaugh Lake with a guy! Hope he's cute! Love, BriBri! OH! BTW Jessica said she saw a bunch of cops out by your house yesterday, hope everything is okay!' she texted.

“You got a message?” Dakota asked.

“Yep! Looks like we got caught by my friend Brianna!” I joked.

“Well, that should make going back to school interesting.”

“No it shouldn't be any problem, she goes to Canyon Falls.”

Dakota started the car but paused as if he just remembered something almost random. “This Brianna, her last name wouldn't happen to be Summers would it?” he asked.

“Yes,” I answered, “Why do you ask? Did you know her?”

“Yeah, we dated a little bit back in the eighth grade for a couple months.”

“Oh? Well, what happened?” I asked, *'And, why are you bringing up past relationships?'*

“It was one of those rare break-ups where we both decided it probably best to go our separate ways,” he answered, “I know it probably sounds weird that I am bringing it up, but I just wanted to be up front with you.”

'Well, I guess that is okay. It isn't really that bad,' I thought to myself, “That's okay, I guess, as long as you two get along.”

“As far as I know we do. It has been a while since we've seen each other, and nothing really major happened, so hopefully, time just smoothed things over.”

“So you're not going to worry about your ex-girlfriend being friends with your current girlfriend?”

Dakota chuckles as he starts the car. “No, I'm not worried. I have no

right to tell you who you can and can't be friends with. You're free to do whatever you want," he said, "The only time you'd ever see me step into something like that is if I got the feeling something dangerous could come of it."

"And what would you do if something dangerous did come up?"

"Simple, I would find a way to help you through it at any cost and in any way possible. If I have to carry you around the world or just be a goofy cheerleader, that's what I'll do," he answered, *'And I will stick to that promise until the rivers of time run dry.'*

'I know you will,' I said to him.

Dakota continued to drive home as I started to text Brianna back.

'Hey, Bri! Trust me, he is! He just took me on a lunch picnic and we went swimming in the lake!' I sent.

Moments later, a reply came in. 'Coolio. So tell me about him! Wat is his name? I saw that he was really tall.'

'His name is Dakota! He is actually a writer. And yes he is tall. I'm pretty sure he is taller than everyone at school.'

'O.o Is his last name Frandsen, and is he like 6 foot 11 or something?'

'Uh.... yeah, But I think he's only 6 foot 7.'

'Wow! How did you two meet?!'

'Well... he actually got me away from my stepdad.'

'REALLY?!?! That jerk is gone?!?! How did that happen?!'

'Something made him snap, he tried to kill me and my mom. But somehow, Dakota managed to stop it.'

'Wow, well then. You tell him that if he hurts you I'll smack him to death.'

'Think you might need 90-inch heels to do that.'

'IKR. Lol :D'

Brianna and I kept texting back and forth as Dakota drove. He didn't act like he was paying much attention to me on the way home, even though I thought I felt him start trying to get in my head a few times. He didn't stay long though, after I mentally whispered, "Girl Talk," each time. The next morning, the real test for us began at school. Chances were that because Brianna and her sister caught us during our weekend adventure, someone else saw us. After a couple quick showers and some fresh scrambled eggs, Dakota drove us to school. Having a car ride to school was much nicer than riding the bus each day. No loud punks first thing in the morning. No idiots tossing around condoms. No weird sticky spots in the seats. Just two people getting sitting back on a normal morning, heading to school.

"You ready for today?" Dakota asked as we were halfway to the school.

“Not really. But it is not like we have much choice,” I answered. I was tired that morning, trying not to fall asleep in the car. I ended up waking up at 6:30 am, same time as I always did. Dakota was already up, dressed, and working on something called “Project: Northern Star,” on the computer in his office (he said it was a project that I inspired).

“You know it could be worse,” he said, “We could be forced to live there.”

“Good point. I'd hate to live with some of the girls from school.”

“They giving you problems?”

“I don't really want to talk about it. But just so you have some warning, some of them pretty much assume that I'm a lesbian because they've never seen me with a guy before.”

“I see. Would one of these so called, 'girls,' happen to be named Kristen White?”

“Yeah... how did you know?”

“I've crossed paths with her before. Needless to say, what happened wasn't very pretty.”

“What happened?”

“In short, one of the first girls she ever harassed, named Macy Snider, started to dabble in some things in order to find a way to hurt Kristen without it ever being traced back to her. Something noticed, promised to 'help' her, and it caused her try to kill her kid brother and herself.”

“You mean that actually happens?”

“Not as much as movies make it seem, but yeah it does happen. Except, something had gone wrong that night.”

“What?” “Kristen came in about a third of the way into the ritual, when we tried our best to isolate everyone from the possessed other than myself and my mentor. Being that its intent was to kill, Kristen got hurt very badly. When the demon screamed, Kristen's back practically exploded in blood as something seemed to crave something into her skin. Upon examination, we could see that the Egyptian symbol for death was left. Ever since then, she has been under extensive monitoring.”

“Why?”

“Usually markings look like nothing more than three very deep scratches from a very big animal. But when an actual symbol, especially one from that long ago, appears then it is a sign something nastier may be coming.”

“Oh, so what would you do if something did happen? And how do you know the possession was real?”

Dakota glanced over at me for a second and took a deep breath. “When during the ceremony, their skin starts to boil rapidly and blood starts to pour from wounds they never had before. And their face... it changes into something

hideous. All of this happens very quickly."

"That is kinda horrifying, just hearing about it. I can't imagine what it was like seeing it happen."

"You don't want to imagine it. It doesn't really help that it was the first time I've ever had to go that deep, in fact, it has been the only time a case got serious. Plus... what we did took things to a much more dangerous spot." I could see a hint of fear growing inside his eyes as Dakota continued to drive closer to school. He took a deep breath before he continued.

"I don't really want to go into it right now because the specific details of how it works are kinda complex," he said.

]"Okay, we don't have to talk about it anymore if you don't want to," I replied, *'But I hope you talk about it later. Hearing you talk about this type of thing is amazing.'*

'I might. But if you are that curious, I guess I can tell you that my mentor and I were working on developing a new form of exorcism,' he telepathically said.

My face dropped. A new form of exorcism? How in the HELL was that possible?! I thought that a Catholic priest was the only person capable of performing an exorcism! And that had to be something that was passed down! In some ways, I didn't believe Dakota. But based on everything I saw him do, and how serious he was about what he was talking about was enough for me to at least hear him out.

A few minutes of silence passed as Dakota drove to school. Traffic gradually got worse, as we tried to find a parking spot. Soon, Dakota parked by a small Christian radio station that was across the street at a three-way intersection. The owners of the station let high schoolers park their vehicles there because they knew how many car wrecks happen in the main lots. However, barely anyone was smart enough to park there, so it quickly became our spot.

Once Dakota parked the car, I started to gather my things so I could make sure that I had everything I needed for today when Dakota stopped me.

"Shandra, wait a sec," he said.

'Why didn't I see this coming?' I asked myself, "What's up?"

"If Kristen gives you any more problems, there is something you can do to get her to back off," he answered.

'Okay... not quite what I was expecting,' I thought, "What is that?"

"The symbol that was carved into her skin; draw it in the air, using your finger, in front of her and she will back off."

"Okay... what was the symbol again? And why would she back off?"

"The symbol is the Amenta, the Egyptian symbol for the Land of the Dead. She will back off because of a sort of PTSD she developed because of the

exorcism."

After his explanation, Dakota started to trace the figure in the air using his finger. He started by tracing a straight line towards his right, followed by an upward curve that leads into a straight line going to his left. He closed the symbol with a downward curve that met with where he started the first line. He then took his finger towards the bottom side of the first shape and drew a line straight down for about three inches. He moved his finger back to the base of the first shape and drew another straight, downward line that was twice the length of the first. Somehow I was able to see the image like smoke floating in mid air for a few moments before it disappeared.

I sighed with relief that Dakota's comments weren't what I thought they were going to be and simply whispered, "Okay."

We both got out of the car at the same time. I met with Dakota on the sidewalk just behind the trunk of the car, facing towards the school after we both grabbed our backpacks. He took his car keys and locked the car using a remote before sliding them into his pocket and wrapped his arm around me. As our feet met the paint of the crosswalk, in front of the school, I wrapped my arm around Dakota's waist and gave him a gentle squeeze.

"I'm going, to be honest," I said, "I thought you were going to want to walk into school at different times so no one would think we are together."

"Don't be silly," he replied, "I'm dating a beautiful and intelligent girl. If anyone has a problem with it, then screw 'em!"

My cheeks started to burn when he said that. I don't know how he kept doing it, making me blush like that. It seemed like he was able to make me blush at least once a day. For at least a few moments, I didn't notice the many stares and whispers directed towards us. Dakota didn't seem to notice them either, or he just didn't care. Teachers either gave us surprised or disgusted glares as we passed them through the halls.

"Hey, do you want to just hang in the cafeteria till the first period?" he asked.

"Sure," I answered, "It beats just standing out here."

"True that."

The school's cafeteria was straight across from the main entrance to the school. A herd of children spilled out of the doors that were used as the main entrance, suggesting the breakfast was somewhat decent. As we got closer to the kitchen area, which was visible to us through small openings in the walls, Dakota was able to see what was on the menu before everyone else.

"See what we are having?" I asked him.

"Plastic egg and sausage omelets," he answered.

"Ah! A somewhat decent school breakfast. I guess I could just use it as a snack."

“It is what I always do. Are you still hungry though? I thought you said my scrambled eggs this morning filled you up?”

“They did... for a minute. I'm just always hungry.”

“Oh, so you're like me. Good to know.”

“Hey don't judge!”

“I'm not!”

I gave Dakota a gentle nudge in his shoulder as he reached for a plastic tray and placed a foam plate that held one of the dollhouse eggs. The eggs themselves were one of the better tasting food options we had at school, everyone just made fun of their cartoon drawing like appearance. I'm not joking, these things looked like something from the kitchen of my younger cousin's dollhouse. When we were finally at the end of the line, Dakota and I started to scan the dozens of tables for a place to sit. It seemed like the entire student body was in that room. Three arms started waving towards us as three guys shouted for Dakota. We could barely hear them over the noise.

“I think I have us a spot if you don't mind the people we'd be sitting with,” Dakota said.

“I don't mind, as long as they're not jerks,” I said.

“They have their days, trust me.”

He started to walk toward the table, occasionally dodging seats that blinding moved in his way, where the arms seemed to sprout from like cartoon plants. Four boys sat in an unfinished star formation while rambling on about random topics.

“So, how was everyone's weekend?”

Dakota asked as we approached the table. Dakota jerked his backpack higher on his shoulder as he pulled out the only available chair so I could sit down. As he reached for an empty chair from another table to sit down, one of the darker skinned boys grew an impressed look on his face.

“Not as good as your's dawg,” he teased.

“What do you mean, Marcus?” Dakota asked. '

“There is a rumor going around school that you got laid in Murtaugh Lake,” said the Hispanic kid, “Wait is this her?”

I tucked my head behind my hand, embarrassed at the assumptions being made. Every time I met a guy I had been accused of being a slut.

'I'm guessing today is one of their days,' I telepathically whispered to Dakota.

'Guess so. I'm so sorry,' he answered.

'It's fine Dakota. It is pointless to fight the stupidity.'

'You're right. But that doesn't mean that we can't put a scare into it.'

A murderous look sprouted in Dakota's eyes. It was obvious that the way his so called friends were referring to me was getting on his nerves and fast. It felt like he was getting ready to bury someone.

“Who is spreading it around?” he asked.

“I wish I knew, dude,” said one of the other guys, “But to be honest, it looks like Elliot Fischer has been spreading it around the most. He's even texted pictures to some people.”

“God DAMN him! I can't believe these retards actually believe that drunk fucker has to say,” Dakota grunted.

“Relax, Dakota. This will probably blow over in a couple weeks,” Marcus said.

“No, it won't. Not unless I weed out the person that sent the text.”

“How the hell are you going to do that?” I asked.

“Easy. I just ask the message where it's traveled.” Everyone at our table, even people at nearby tables who overheard, was confused. I didn't realize it at the time, but not everyone knew Dakota was good with gadgets. He was also the type to get crazy ideas (a sometimes even crazy enough to figure out how to pull them off).

“Any of you actually get the text?” he asked.

“Yeah,” said Marcus, “Let me forward it to you.”

“Please do.” Dakota took a few short breaths before continuing on. He was able to calm himself just enough to function without using the table as a Frisbee to hit somebody.

“Now before this gets any further, how about I introduce everyone the proper way? Without accusing myself or my lovely girl of promiscuity?” Dakota suggested.

'Please do,' I pleaded with him.

“We weren't suggesting anything, Dakota, we were just letting you know something was up,” said the fourth guy.

“I know, Branden, I know and I apologize for getting agitated, but you guys do know how that type of discussion gets on my nerves,” Dakota explained, “Anyway, guys, this is Shandra. We just started seeing each other and to blow off some steam from something that happened over the weekend, we decided to sneak out and have lunch picnic by the lake. I can't really talk much about what happened but needless to say I'm glad it did as you can probably tell from the pictures since all they show is a young couple enjoying a nice swim together.”

He turned his head towards me with a bright smile on his face. *'Which I hope we can go again,'* he whispered to my mind.

'As long as I can actually grab a bathing suit this time,' I giggled.

'As you wish,' he giggled. Dakota reached for my hand and planted a gentle kiss on my knuckles.

I smiled and lipped, “Thank you,” to him.

He started pointing towards his friends to get started on introducing his friends. “And Shandra; this is Marcus, Enrique, Lucas, and Branden. I guess welcome to our band of misfits and outcasts,” he said.

“Hi, everyone. So how did you all meet?” I asked.

Like Dakota said,” Lucas added, “We are the outcasts. The school doesn't want anything to do with us. We don't really fit with any of the clicks, and we're too ambitious and stubborn to stay quiet like they want us. We ain't the popular ones in school, but everyone sure as hell knows who we are.”

“We all met back in middle school,” Dakota explained, “Every single one of us was a bit of a drifter that got made fun of a lot. Eventually, we all found each other and kinda stuck together. And needless to say, we've been the reason schools in the area have stepped up their game in making sure shit gets done.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“We've been known to get a lot of people in trouble for things they normally got away with,” Marcus said.

“There are a lot of things the school let students get away with, that we get mad at. And since we are the types to get violent against anything that tries to hurt us, or somebody we care about, the school makes sure we don't get angry,” Dakota explained.

“Yeah, everyone got scared when your hulking boyfriend started throwing people like they were dolls,” Braden joked. As the guys continued to talk, the picture message finally appeared on Dakota's phone. He went straight to work on finding the source of the photos taken of us by maneuvering through several images and menus I thought could only be accessed by breaking a phone. Seeing him at work was like watching a stunt driver move through a nearly impossible course. In about four minutes time he managed to find a phone number, one I didn't recognize.

“Got it,” he shouted.

“Well, that was quick. How did you do it?” I asked.

“Like I said, I just asked the phone where it was from. Then I used the school's wifi network like a cell phone tower to translate the phone's language to something I can understand, which gave me the list of phone numbers the picture was sent to,” explained Dakota, “I can also access the phone remotely to dig up anything I can use to blackmail the person if the need arises.”

“Are you sure you want to take it that far? I mean it is only a couple bad cell phone pics.”

Dakota started to return his phone to the normal settings and opened up

the phone's gallery as he took a few more short breaths. “You know what, you're right. And besides, now that I actually look at them, these pics aren't bad considering they were from a cell camera.”

He stuck his phone in front of me and scrolled through the seven pictures taken of us. Somehow, despite the attached captions being, “Hey look! Big Dakota finally found a girl slutty enough to sleep with him,” the pictures could pass as art. But in a couple shots I noticed something with Dakota and me in the water that looked very familiar.

'Hey, do you see that?' I asked Dakota.

'Yep. He doesn't know it but that moron caught a couple good pictures of Olivia too,' he replied.

'How is that possible?'

'He just got lucky. I might actually have to compliment him on these shots if I get the chance.'

'Kill him with kindness.'

'I guess that works too. I was just thinking more along the lines of one creator showing respect for another's work.'

“Woah, wait! You're just going to let it slide?!” Enrique asked.

“Actually yes,” Dakota answered, “I'm going to let this one slide.”

“Why?” Enrique asked. “Simply because I have more important things to worry about than some punk using his talents to make fun of people,” Dakota replied.

“Elliott Fischer has talent? Other than getting shit faced? And what other important things do you have going on? Another one of your freaky ass ghost hunts?” Marcus chimed up.

“Well number one, Elliott does have photographic skills. I've seen him at work, he is one of the best photographers I've seen. And number two, yes I mean my ghost hunts and you only call them freaky because you actually ran out on one!” Dakota laughed.

“Hey! You didn't see what I saw!” Marcus grunted.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Marcus decided to come along with me on a case about four months ago, before I came up with the fancy names and logos, and about five hours in I heard this loud bang than all of the sudden Marcus runs right out of the building like he was being chased by a chainsaw maniac. Turns out there was a pack of raccoons that were making the racket the family was reporting, and they plotted to scare the living daylights out of one of us. Thankfully we were just five blocks from Marcus's house, otherwise, he'd be running so fast home his clothes fly off like in a cartoon!” Dakota laughed.

“Ha... ha... HA! Laugh it up, white boy! Let's see who's laughing after one of those rabid bastards bites your dick off!” Marcus yelled.

I started to laugh at the story but was overpowered by the bell as it screamed for everyone to get to class. Everyone in the cafeteria flooded the exit at once, making it impossible to move around. I grabbed on to Dakota's hand as we hurried our way through the doors and into the main hallway.

“Why does everyone have to rush the hall at the same time?!” I shouted.

“Because their minds work like herds of sheep!” Dakota joked.

“No kidding. So what is your first class?”

“Speech, down in A hall. Yours?” “Gym. So I guess we should split now?”

“Not necessarily. I could walk with you, so we could talk a bit more. Besides cutting through the gym just might be a bit faster than stepping on these people.”

“Oh? What do you want to talk about?”

We started to walk our way down was called the “D Hall” of the school. Many of the science classes were located here and lead to a small flight of stairs which were the back entrance to the gyms. My guess was that not many of the science classes started this early, or the classes were not large at all since this was the less crowded hallway in the entire building in the mornings.

“Well, the photos. I just wanted to make sure that you'll be okay,” he said.

“Will you be?” I asked.

“Not if I know that you're not. I'd hate for you to have to go through the crap that might come from this.”

“Dakota, don't worry about me. I've dealt with worse than this. I'll be okay.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I'm sure. I love that you care so much about me but I'll be okay. Don't worry.”

“Hey, I'm your boyfriend. It's my job to worry about you.”

“I know. But it is like you said, they're all idiots.”

“Yeah, but you don't have to deal with it.”

“It's not like they're going to do anything. These people are too ignorant to even think of decent insults. Those that do only sink themselves further.”

“Yeah, you have a good point.” Without realizing it, Dakota and I walked into the gym where my class was located. Girls and guys started to hurry into the locker rooms to get ready for class. The guys could be heard screaming and yelling like they were taking part in a gladiator fight. They always were like that. It was rather annoying. Plus whenever one of the coaches was gone for the day, the jocks would become much worse.

It was easy to tell when those days were happening, especially when Dakota had gym class since there was an incident that got one loud mouth out of a dentist appointment and nearly into a coma (since Dakota knocked out the teeth that were giving him problems).

Yeah, he may have been the nicest guy I know, but he also had one hell of a dark side. Thankfully, and I am honestly not sure how, but I was never a target of his dark side. In fact, it looked like my well being turning sour was often his trigger. He did talk about a couple incidents in his book, but it is very likely that you'll hear about a few more he never mentioned later on. But let's get back to the story before I get ahead of myself (one of the things from Dakota that rubbed off on me, lol).

“Well I guess I should be going,” he said giving me a tight squeeze.

“Yeah, see you at lunch,” I said.

“See you.” Dakota snuck a peck on my forehead before jogging to and out of a pair of metal doors that lead outside. As soon as he was gone, my feet started to move themselves to the locker room so I could get ready for class. Another metal door was in the way. As I started to reach for it, a light tingle started to fill my head. It was a familiar sensation, that only happened when one of two people was thinking about me (the second one I thought was dead).

'If they get to be too much, don't be afraid to come find me,' Dakota's voice said.

'Woah, Dakota, how are you able to do that?' I asked.

'The same way I can when we are a few feet apart. Though to be honest I've never been able to experiment with the range. I'm guessing the distance apart we are right now is roughly three hundred feet, give or take. This is likely my best.'

As Dakota was talking I walked into the locker room and hurried over to my locker. I started to mess around with the combination in order to get to my gym clothes.

'Four, seven, thirteen. Seems easy to remember.' Dakota chuckled.

'Yep. Same as my birthday. April seventh, right at one o'clock,' I said, *'Wait a minute! Are you watching me get undressed?!'*

]Dakota started to laugh. *'No, I'm not. Trust me. I happily am waiting to see it in person when the time is right,'* he said, *'But in truth, I've only been able to master talking to someone with my mind. As far as actually being able to use their eyes to see something, that is a skill I have yet to master.'*

'Alright. I trust you.'

As soon as I opened my locker, I took out my gym uniform and started to tuck away my normal school stuff. I could still feel Dakota inside my head as I started to undress. It felt very creepy knowing that he could pop in any time he would like. But he swore he wasn't trying anything nasty.

'Well, it looks like things are calm. Almost like that text message never happened,' he said.

'See? Just like I said, no point in making a big fuss about a couple of bad cell phone pics.' I told him.

'Yeah, I'll give you credit there.'

I took off my blouse and bra and stuffed them into my locker as a girl walked up to me.

"Hey Shandra looks like you had a fun weekend," she said.

"Oh hey, Jennifer. It was good. How was yours?" I asked.

"It was alright. But not as fun as a swim in the lake."

]"You can tell we weren't doing what Elliott thought right?"

"Yeah, he has always been a jackass. I don't know why I ever dated him."

"You dated him?"

"For about a year, the biggest fucking mistake I've ever made," she sighed, "So when did you and Dakota start dating?"

"Over the weekend. He was helping me with something that happened my house, and I don't know, we just sort of bonded."

"Well, that's cool. I'm sure he'll be good to you."

"Hey! Quit staring at my breasts, Lesbitch!" screamed one of the other girls.

I quickly slipped on my athletic bra and scanned the room to find out who was yelling. I hurried to get dressed since I knew time was running out for class, but I needed to find out what was going on.

'That voice sounds familiar,' hinted Dakota.

'Yeah, I know,' I whispered to him.

"Kristen, leave my sister the HELL alone!" shouted Jennifer. She turned to face her sister's attacker. To no surprise, the one person I thought was going to give me problems was responsible.

"Jenn, you fat, incestuous bitches should just kill yourselves. You disgust me!" Kristen screamed

"Fuck OFF! What in the Hell is wrong with you?! You know that was a damn lie!" Jennifer screamed. Some girls ran out of the locker room and out to the gym, panicking about the fight that was about to happen. Everyone else just watched. I, however, was ready to throttle Kristen. She and Jennifer continued the screaming match for what seemed like hours.

'Anger is not a sexy look on you,' Dakota joked.

'Not the time, dude!' I said.

'Actually, yes it is. Remember what I showed you in the car?'

'I can't do that now!'

'Shandra, as much as I hate to say it, you are watching a nuclear overload. Something needs to be done and fast to simmer it down before someone ends up dead.'

'Alright, I see your point,' I sighed, *'Wait, how will it do any good if she doesn't see the symbol?'*

'Shit, I forgot that detail. When you draw that symbol, she will feel a very sharp heat sensation where it was cut into her skin. Normally, it would only feel like grabbing a hot pan out of an oven without a heat glove. But when she is aggravated like that, a nasty rash that is photosensitive will appear on her back. So far that has only lasted two hours at most.'

'What if this time it ends up worse?'

"Wait for a second, Jennifer? Are you dating that slut, Shandra? You Lesbitches get it on in front of Dakota all weekend?' Kristen screamed.

'THAT BITCH!'

'She's all yours.'

I took and deep breath and pointed two fingers straight at Kristen. I straightened my arm out and slowly traced an amenta in mid air. Kristen quickly froze as I finished the top portion of the amenta and started to work on the straight lines that came straight down. By then the entire room froze and stared at me as if they knew something was about to happen.

"Shandra, what are you doing?" Jennifer asked.

"Just watch," I told her. I finished the first straight line, which started to draw tears from Kristen's eyes. She was frightened by what was happening. It was like she was accepting that she was about to be executed. At least that is how it felt to me. I started the second line, and I watched as the whites in Kristen's eyes turn a throbbing red in an instant. Something inside me started to feel guilty about what I was doing, but that guilt had no control over my body. The very second I finished the second line, everyone gasped as Kristen fell to her knees with tiny drips of blood that mixed with her tears. She even started to drool red waterfalls.

'Oh my god,' Dakota gasped.

'Dakota... did... I just... kill her?' I was afraid of the answer when more blood started to fall from Kristen's back.

Chapter 22
Immortals?

'Shandra...' Dakota whispered.

'... Is she dead?' I asked.

'No, she is just injured. Badly.' 'I thought you said it would only burn a bit.'

'I did. I also said that it might be worse if she's aggravated. But that has never happened before.'

'What should we do?'

'I have an idea. Walk over to her and kneel down so your eyes are at her level. Also, ease your breathing. You're going to want to approach this like having to help a small child with a bad cut. You don't want her to freak out otherwise you'll lose her.'

'Are you sure? Cause you didn't seem to know about her ending up like she just survived a massacre!'

'To be honest, I'm not sure. But I have a feeling that there might be something else going on that will help heal her if we turn the tides.'

'Really?'

'Yes, just do as I say and it should work.'

'Alright.'

I slowly approached Kristen, who was about ten feet away from my gym locker. I could feel some sort of energy, that felt like static, coursing through my body. Everything felt so unreal, almost like it was taken straight out of a comic book movie. As I stood in front of Kristen, I thought I could feel

Dakota's presence in the room.

'Now as you kneel down in front of her, imagine you holding my hand. Once you feel that connection, visualize a white light coming out of my hand and going into your body,' Dakota said.

'Got it,' I told him. Following Dakota's directives, I imagined the white light from him entering my body as I sat on my knees in front of Kristen, making sure our eyes were the exact same level. The static I felt in my body started to mingle with Dakota's light, making it feel like a powerful essence. It is so hard to describe, but it felt amazing. Yet somehow, the sensation felt a bit familiar.

'Good. That tingly feeling is completely normal. When my abilities first started to show up, that is how it felt. If you keep doing this the tingling should go away,' Dakota added.

'That's fine,' I told him, *'But what do I do now to heal her?'*

'Just channel the energy through your body, passing through your heart, and into your other hand. Let concern for Kristen in your heart add to the energy. It will help with what we need to do.'

'Okay.'

I felt the energy quickly grow stronger as it moved through my body. I used my left hand to bring in Dakota's energy and move to my right, the same hand I used to nearly kill Kristen. I had no idea how I knew how to do this, but I had no time to ask questions.

'When you feel a warm, relaxing sensation in your hand I will instruct you on how to draw two symbols to help heal her. They are runes from Norse mythology,' Dakota said.

'Norse?' I ask.

'Vikings. Remember the painting with the Valkyries?'

'Dakota, you can't be serious!'

'Call me crazy all you want, Shandra, but if this works I may not be the only one in this relationship with a few special tricks.'

'Just tell me what to do! My hand feels hot!'

'Alright, with your thumb, draw a small circle on the top of her forehead. Then draw a straight line from the bottom of the circle, straight down until you hit between her eyebrows. This symbol is called the Sól, it represents the healing power of the sun. You both should feel a warm sensation where your skin touches hers. This is a good sign. If I'm judging this correctly, we should see the effects immediately. And if so, there will be one more symbol we will try to clean the mess up.'

Without thinking about what the other two symbols could be, I got to work with the Sól symbol. I didn't know how it was possible, but a dim light actually appeared on Kristen forehead that followed my finger as I drew it.

Immediately, the red from Kristen's eyes disappeared and the blood and tears quickly dried up, almost leaving no trace. Somehow the blood that fell from her back even started to disappear when the symbol was finished.

'Now, when the light on her forehead begins to fade, draw a cross in the exact same spot. At the bottom of the cross, draw a diagonal line going northwest. Make it to where it goes about halfway between the horizontal line and the bottom of the cross,' Dakota said.

'And what does this symbol do?' I asked him.

'It is called the Wolfsangel, it is said to be used to bind and eliminate harmful influences. Hopefully, this will make it to where whatever is upsetting Kristen doesn't affect her as much and she will start being nice to people.'

'And if she isn't?'

'I think you already know, now hurry.'

As the light from the first symbol started to fade, I quickly started to trace the Wolfsangel on Kristen's forehead, as instructed. Almost immediately after I finished, her blood that fell on the floor seemed to evaporate like water instantly. Kristen started to breathe calmly and slowly come out of her shock.

'That is what I was hoping to see. One more move and this event will disappear like a bad dream,' said Dakota.

'How in the HELL is that possible?!' I nearly screamed.

'Something that I have arranged myself. Do you know the symbol for the planet Saturn?'

'Yeah, why?'

'Because we are going to ask him for a favor.'

'You don't mean... How is that even... How?'

Before members of the audience judge, think about how you would react if you witnessed what I have just by being AROUND Dakota. I haven't even begun to go into detail about the crazy stuff that happened. So far; he was showing me ghosts, time travel, reincarnation, and superpowers among everything else. So immediately, I began to think that he was hinting ancient gods... were real.

'I'll try to explain later,' he said, *'But for now, draw the symbol and visualize me right next to you.'*

'Got it... wait two of you are already here. One in white and one in black,' I said.

'Even better, just let their energy merge into yours and mimic exactly what they say.'

'Alright.'

I channeled the energy from the two Yin Yang Dakotas (sounds kinda mean I know) and fed it into the energies that already flowed to my hand. I

could feel the power becoming ten times as strong as I drew the symbol for Saturn and all three Dakotas and I chanted at the exact same time.

'Saturnus, vos rogamus, retro telas tempus. In tantum ut iam ex memoria lectiones molestius tangere cutaneis et spiritus qui in hoc momento.'

I blinked just once, and I found myself standing in the same place and position I was in when I unknowingly began to torture her. Kristen had also been adjusted into the same position she was in as she was attacking June. Except for this time, she had a look of guilt on her face. The energies I felt from the two extra Dakotas had disappeared; leaving only Kristen, myself, and Dakota to fix the rest of the mess.

'Just go up to her and give her a hug,' Dakota suggested, *'And tell her to come find us either at lunch or after school, whatever works out better.'*

'Okay,' I answered, *'But can you tell me what the chant meant?'*

'*Roughly, it means 'Saturn, we ask you spin back time. So painful lessons from now may only be remembered by the those who touch by skin and spirit in this moment.' I'll explain everything else at lunch. I'll talk to you later.'*

I could feel Dakota cutting off the connection in my head that allowed us to talk to each other (at least I think that is how he would describe it). The pressure from another mind mingling with my own quickly became lighter, almost like finally figuring out a difficult math problem. I simply took a deep breath before walking over to Kristen to make sure she was okay.

“What just happened?” Kristen asked.

“It is hard to explain,” I answered, “Just come here.” I extended my arms to embrace Kristen in the warmest hug I could possibly muster for someone who had been relentlessly torturing me for as long as she knew of my existence. She may have been a bitch, but she was still another human being that just experienced a messed up situation. And since it was partially my fault, I could at least do this much to make her feel better. As she slowly wrapped her arms around my body, I positioned my lips next to her ear just so I could pass along one last message.

“How did you know?” she asked.

“Dakota, told me to do it if I ever had a problem with you,” I answered, “But I honestly didn't know that it was going to get that bad, even Dakota didn't know. I am so sorry.”

“How was that even possible?”

“I honestly don't know. But I do have a couple suggestions that might help.”

“What?”

“Start treating everyone nicer, apologize for what you have done, and do something to improve the lives of others. Also, come find me and Dakota either during lunch or after school. He might have something to help.”

"I hope so because it still hurts."

"I can imagine. But be careful of who you tell this story to, because Dakota made it so only you, I, and he will remember it."

"How is that even possible?"

"I don't know to tell you the truth. But I bet Dakota will be able to explain it better than I ever could."

"Alright, I'll come find you two at lunch. You both have A lunch, not B, right?"

"Yeah, we do."

"Okay, I'll try to find you two."

"Alright, see you."

Kristen, already dressed up for gym class, slowly walked out of the locker room without acknowledging the others around her. When her fingers graced the metal door, she turned her head with her long blond hair partially covering her face. A look I never thought I'd see coming from her.

"June, Jennifer, Shandra, I'm sorry," she whispered, "I'm sorry about everything I've done to you."

Before any of us could say anything, she bolted out of the room, presumably to begin jogging the warm-up laps our teacher had us do during the start of class. Everyone else shifted their attention towards me. It felt as if the entire room was frozen in place.

"What just happened?" asked Jennifer.

"To be honest, you wouldn't believe me if I told you," I answered, "All you alright June?"

"Yeah, I'll be okay," she answered.

"Good," I said, "I guess I better head out to class."

I tried my best to act normal in gym class as if nothing happened. Everyone else seemed to constantly whisper about me during class, if not for the rest of the morning, and fall silent when I came close to them. Oddly enough, the conversations about me starting and stopping at random were probably the most normal parts of the day.

I expected to be pulled out of class and expelled for what happened, but nothing even hinted at the possibility of it actually happening. By the time second, third, and fourth periods came around the reactions were still the same. I tried to reach Dakota using his mind-radio-trick-thing several times but with no result. I was convinced I was doing it wrong. Once the bell for lunch rang, I hurried out of class to meet up with Dakota so I could finally a chance to talk about what happened with Kristen.

'Dakota, can you hear me? I've been trying to reach you all day! I need to talk about what happened with Kristen,' I said. I thought I could feel him

about to speak, but kissing noises and the sounds of immature laughter coming from behind me threw me out of focus. My fists started to clench, thinking I already knew exactly who was making those noise. I turned around to get a good look at them.

“Hey, bay-bee, why don't you and I head down to the river and let the waves soak us in,” said an annoying voice, “Let me show you how a real man fucks his bitch.”

Elliot Fischer and his two dimwitted shadows started to laugh like they each had guzzled down a bottle of vodka. If only I had those bottles to beat them upside the head.

“Go away, Elliott!” I screamed.

“Hey! Don't you talk to me like that, cunt!” Elliott whined.

“Yeah, don't you dare talk to him like that,” cried one of the shadows.

“Yeah!” shouted the other. Before anything else could be said, a large Titan hand appeared out of nowhere, slowly stretching outward as if it was preparing to swat away tiny pests it could've easily eaten. Elliot readied to backhand me across the face, oblivious to the fact someone was about to do the same to him. I smiled and quickly took a step back as the large hand swooped down, striking all three guys in a single blow. Their bodies flew into a wall of lockers, making a sonic boom that quite literally shook the entire school.

A look of death burned in the eyes of the man who owned that hand as he readied for the retaliation. One of Elliot's groupies got up first and took a swing at Dakota. His fist made contact with Dakota's chest, but Dakota barely reacted. The second groupie tried to do the same, with still no reaction from Dakota. Instead, he simply waited for both of them to take a swing at the exact same time. He would then grab the outstretched arms and started to twist them together like he was making rope. While holding the tied arms upwards, Dakota then used his large foot to plow directly into the goons' armpits, sending them flying into Elliot as he tried to stand back up.

“Real men, do not talk to ANYONE that way,” Dakota shouted, “You dumbasses were warned about attacking me or my family. Yet as always you never fucking listen... wait, have you morons been drinking?”

“Smells like rum to me,” shouted another familiar male voice. Dakota and I both turned to see who had joined the conversation. Officer Jerome stood behind Dakota with his arms crossed. It looked like he had seen everything go down.

“Elliott, Edward, Riley... follow me,” said Officer Jerome, “Dakota, Shandra... why don't you two get some lunch? I'll talk to you two later.”

“Alright, we will see you later,” Dakota said.

'What the heck just happened?' I asked him.

'I texted Jerry once I saw Elliott start eyeballing you like he was about to try something,' Dakota answered. Officer Jerome quickly took all three of the

pests into his office.

'And he came that quick?'

'Well Shandra, it is a unique situation. There are a lot of unusual circumstances, heck it would be safe to say the arrangement with you is equivalent of hiding a president's family after an assassination attempt.'

'Is it really that serious?'

'For me, it is. Like I said, you are like family, I'll guard you with my life.'

'But how are you going to do that when you get handcuffed?'

'Idaho law has way too many loopholes for that to happen, trust me.'

'Are you sure?'

'Trust me, just watch when the time comes. It doesn't take being a high ranking politician to become a master at law.'

'I'm going, to be honest, Dakota, that's a bit harsh.'

"Shall we head to lunch?" Dakota asked loudly.

"Sure... I guess," I answered.

Dakota wrapped his arm around my neck so we could walk to lunch together. As our feet practically marched in sync, I began to wonder why he bounced from one conversation to the next.

'Sorry about the quick change, I figured we should try to beat Kristen to the lunchroom,' he explained.

'It's okay, I guess. You just kinda threw me off bouncing from one conversation to the next.' I said.

'Again, sorry. I've been trying to kick that habit for a while now.'

'It's fine, I can imagine that you've had to switch like that several times. But if we can jump back to the law side of our conversation, I am wanting to know where you get your idea from, that it wouldn't take much to become an expert at law here?'

'Right, sure. I will give you that my explanation was a bit harsh, but it is, unfortunately, the truth. Heck, even Idaho lawmakers don't understand Idaho law at times. But the best way I can tell you the solution for our problem with Elliott only relies on one simple question...'

'And that is?'

'How good of an actress are you?'

'Really? That's it?'

'Yep, that is it. So are you?'

'Better than you might expect.'

'Alright, so with that we should probably work out our story, just to

cover our bases. I know Jerry is going to want to put a show for the dumb ass principals who think they have power over the school.'

'Alright, well it is simple. Elliott and his lackeys started to sexually harass me while I was on my way to lunch when after telling him to back off he started to make threats and gestures which would indicate he was wanting a physical altercation. You happened to come up, saw the whole thing, and took action right as Elliott was getting ready to hit me.'

'Good, that is pretty much what I was going for. But for my side, I was going to include how all three of them have a reputation for getting drunk and getting violent. That is what is going to bury them. As for me, they are probably going to push for a separation period so we both could cool off. Which the last time that happened I ended up in PASS room, even though the little notice the principal supposedly sent never made it to the PASS room teacher. Needless to say, I stayed anyway and enjoyed it better than the class I was supposed to go to at the time.'

'Are they going to do that again?'

'Maybe, we will see how Jerry goes with it.'

Both of our attentions were caught by the sight of food being handed out by the lunch ladies. If my memory is correct, I believe lunch was finger steaks and french fries. But that wasn't important. What was important was our game plan for dealing with Kristen. Dakota also knew, more so than I did at the time, how important was Kristen's overall well being. So much so, we ignored the lines of idiots trying to continue harassing us about our weekend adventure.

We found a completely deserted table, surprisingly far from Dakota's friends who I thought would join us again, to set up shop. I often compared the vibe I got from Dakota to company executives getting ready for a lunch meeting. His professionalism was unbelievable for a guy his age. The entire time he focused on three things; Kristen's well being, my reactions, and the meal he sat in front of him.

“So are you ready for this?” he asked.

“Do I have much of a choice?” I asked him.

“You always have a choice,” he answered, “This part of the job is very difficult, especially under these weird circumstances.”

“You mean someone being cut by an invisible force? THAT has happened to you before?!”

“Not in this context.”

“So what are we going to do?”

“We just need to talk with her for a few minutes to see what is going through her mind, just to make sure she is okay.”

“How can anybody be okay with what happened to her?”

“Just wait and see. Besides, through this experience, you may find out

that you and Kristen aren't so different." Somehow, right on cue, Kristen walked right up to our table. She was almost unrecognizable without her snotty attitude that made fresh milk curdle. I was in disbelief of what I was seeing.

"Is it alright if I sit with you two?" she asked.

"Of course," Dakota answered, "We were actually hoping that you would come by. I heard this morning got pretty rough."

Kristen sat down as she looked like she was trying to hold back a rude remark. Her eyes squinted so tight, it almost cut off circulation to her whole face. She sat her tray down so she could pull out her chair. The moment she sat down, Dakota reached his hand over Kristen's and gripped very tightly. His eyes started to dig deep into hers.

"Kristen, I warned you something like this would happen if you kept going," said Dakota.

"How could you have known?" she asked, "Shandra, how did you know?"

"Dakota told me to do that. He walked me through the whole thing," I answered.

"Why?" she asked.

"Kristen, if I wasn't intervening, the things coming for you would be several times worse than what happened," Dakota said. As soon as he said that, Kristen started to break down in tears. Her cries were silent at first. Dakota moved over to her as soon as he could tell she was about to make a scene and wrapped her in his arms.

"How long has it been since Zack's accident?" he whispered.

"Three... three years," she answered.

I could see that Kristen was starting to relive a horrific moment, one where she first hears the tragic news about a very important man in her life. My mind kept flashing back to the day I found out my real father supposedly died. Kristen was a near perfect replica of my image from that day, from the tears that wanted to wash away the truth to the hands wanting to grasp the one thing that would take us far, far away. I was starting to see why Dakota saw Kristen and I was similar personalities in a dark world that tried to consume us.

The only difference between her and I was that she was trying to find a way to burn everything that came close to her. Probably something I would've done if I didn't have Dakota to distract me.

'What are you doing to her, Dakota? She is about to lose it,' I whispered to him.

"Time has certainly gone by, hasn't it?" he asked Kristen.

'Dakota! Are you hearing me? I think we should back off!' I nearly screamed.

'Shandra, just wait,' he said, *'What I am about to say is something that*

needs to be said.'

“Maybe for you,” Kristen said, “But if feels like it was just yesterday. I swear I see him sometimes, late at night. He would always look like he was upset.”

In that moment I started to notice a difference in the air around Kristen. It was like the distortion one would see when in the middle of a desert. The temperature around us started to drop slowly, making the area around us feel colder. Clouds of our breath would form and linger in front of our faces.

“Kristen, your brother could very well still be around watching over you. To be honest, I don't think your brother wouldn't like seeing you treating other people the way you have been lately,” Dakota said. Something about the chilled, brisk air around us made it feel as if a concerned soul was in agreement with Dakota. Was it Kristen's brother?

“How would you know? How is that even possible?” Kristen asked.

“There are a lot of things that cannot be explained, at least not with the crap school curriculum that is... very well nation wide. Here in Idaho is the worst,” Dakota said.

“Then how would you know?”

“I think you know the answer to that already.”

Kristen looked at Dakota with dead eyes, as if the exorcism was nothing more than a folk tale. She didn't act she believed any of it, or better yet, it was supposed to be an event never spoken of again. It must've been intense, what happened, and the pieces were still being picked up.

“Whatever. I just wish there was a way to talk to Zack again at least once,” Kristen added.

'Is that even possible, Dakota?' I asked.

“There is a way to do that. Do you have a radio that can receive AM?” Dakota asked Kristian. “Yeah, my alarm clock.”

“Do you have to have a voice recorder of any kind? Even if it is an app on your phone?” he asked, *'Pay close attention to what happens Shandra, this may end up helping you.'*

'How so?' I asked.

'I'll explain later,' he said, “Cause if you do, Kristen, there just might be a way for you to hear his voice again...”

“What? Suck fresh chicken blood while I am completely naked and I should see him come out of the radio?” Kristen joked.

Even Dakota, who had been trying to stay serious the entire time, let out a few chuckles in response to Kristen's joke. For me, I was completely freaked out since this was a side of Kristen I never saw. Most of her “jokes” were sarcastic in nature, meant to harass whoever was in a forty foot radius.

“No, not quite,” Dakota giggled, “Whatever you wear is up to you, though I would hope your older brother wouldn't jump at the chance to see his little sister naked.”

“Yeah... right,” Kristen responded, “So what then? How do I allegedly talk to my dead brother?”

“Well, it is really easy to do. Tonight, when you get some alone time, take your radio and set it to the lowest frequency you can find. Make sure you can only hear static come through. Then focus on the image of your brother and simply ask if he is around.”

“So, what do I need the recorder for? And not too geeky of an answer, please?”

“Alright, the less geeky version,” Dakota responded, “Well, the theory is that white noise, or static, can help a spirit communicate. People try to say it is because spirits exist on those frequencies so by tuning something just right, you can help them speak. When in truth, your mind is a bit more relaxed, which helps you focus on your surroundings. The recorder will serve two purposes. If you can attach headphones to it than you can have another source of static help you listen in. It will also help you actually hear your brother's voice in real time if it works.”

“Oh... okay, that makes sense. But how do you know it would work?” Before Dakota could answer, the cold air around us seemed to be moving around by itself, like it had an actual body it could manipulate. The waves I mentioned before, moved a part of its “body” just over Kristen's head and began messing up her hair. It looked like an older male figure had reached down and rubbed her head. Some people that happened to be listening to our conversation noticed Kristen's hair moving by itself, with no visible source of wind, and practically froze as their eyes jumped from their sockets.

“What the heck?” Kristen nearly shouted. Dakota lifted a single finger, pointed to the wavy air and smiled.

“THAT is how I know!” he said. Kristen quickly shivered in response to the cold hands that brushed her hair. I could almost hear her heart stop once she realized what was going on.

“Was that...”

“Yeah,” I whispered, “Your brother is here.”

'Good to see you're catching on,' Dakota confirmed, *'You're right on the money.'*

Throughout the entirety of our conversation, all three of us impulsively ate our lunches, only stopping when our forks met our tongues completely naked of any food. We all set our forks down on our lunch trays, waiting for the other to continue the conversation. Even the spirit of Zack felt like he was eagerly waiting for his little sister to speak up. Apparently, he was trying to get in touch with her. Kristen started to look like she was lost deep in thought before having

the courage to say something.

"Alright," she said, "I guess I'll give it a try tonight. But I better go, I have to meet with someone about an assignment for English class."

"Alright, see you around, I guess," I said.

"See you," Dakota said. Kristen and Zack immediately left the table as Dakota got ready to continue the conversation with me. I sat and wondered what aspect of the conversation we had was going to be needed for my future reference.

"Nice job, by the way," Dakota said.

"Thanks," I replied, "But what did you mean when you said it might help me later?"

"Well, I thought that it may help trying to decode whatever happened to your biological father."

My eyes nearly started to swell up. I felt excited so much my entire body started to feel like a little girl I was when my father got back during his leave just in time for my birthday. I remember walking up to this big box I found in the middle of the living room, just after I got home from school. For weeks, my mom was teasing me about some HUGE present she and dad got me for my birthday.

I was wanting a gorgeous pair of blue, sparkly inline skates so I could race my friends when we weren't at school. The size of the box was way too large for skates, which immediately told me something else was inside. I opened up the box, to find the actual skates strapped to two thick, muscular arms wrapped in army sleeves. The skates almost looked like they replaced the man's hands. A head soon rose from the box, making me happier than anything else could in the world. My father was home. But it isn't like that really mattered anymore.

"How would it help? Even if he is alive, it would impossible to find him. If he is dead, what are the chances of me even seeing him because of how crazy things have been?" I asked.

"Shandra," he said, "The moment things started to calm down, the day I came to get you, did you happen to feel like there was anyone else around? Someone who was trying to help you feel better about the situation?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure that was you." Dakota smiled greatly as he was flattered by my suggestion. He even sprouted a few shades of red across his cheeks.

"No, not me. I was meaning before I got there," he said.

"Well, no. I was too stressed out to even see straight," I told him, "Wait... did you see anyone?"

"See? No, I didn't. My gifts don't necessarily work like that. Though that would be cool," he joked, "But I did feel someone there who was worried

about you. They didn't stay long, just long enough so I could get a vibe from them. They felt like they had like an aunt or close sister sort or relationship with you. She also felt like she was at least twenty-six. I may be off though, I was focusing more on finding and helping you."

"Do you happen to know her name?"

My heart began to sink. The vague description could only fit one person in my life.

"Actually, now that I think about it, there is a name that does come to mind. I believe it started with a C," he said.

"Would it be Carol?" I asked. "Actually, that sounds about right."

"She was my aunt. She died of cancer when I was six." Tears began to spill from my eyes. I loved Aunt Carol. Growing up, she was the closest thing I could call a best friend. She was my biological father's adopted sister. I never knew much about her real family, but she knew me better than my own parents. The day she died, she made a promise to me that she would always be watching over me, and be there the day I got married. Random memories, good ones, kept flashing over and over inside my mind. My smile must've given away some sort of detail since I noticed Dakota started to emit the same warmth that healed my wounds.

"I'm guessing she was able to keep a promise," he smiled.

"How do you know?" I asked him.

"This isn't the first time I've delivered that news to someone. The reaction goes one of three ways; bliss, relaxation, or guilt. Thankfully I can see yours is the best of the three."

"I am guessing mine would be considered bliss."

"Yep. An enjoyment in acknowledging that a person who had a tremendously positive influence on your life still lingers from their afterlife."

"What are the other two reactions?"

"Well, relaxation is simply taking comfort in seeing a familiar face after being separated for quite some time. It often mixes in with bliss at times. Then guilt usually comes when something very wrong has happened the living know very well the dead would be furious to know about."

"How often has that happened?"

"More often than I would like to admit, to be honest. But going back to my idea, how would you feel about trying to strike up a conversation with your Aunt Carol?"

"I would love to! How would we do it?"

"Well, pretty much exactly how I told Kristen, but with a few minor adjustments."

"Like what?"

“Just a few gadgets to help set the stage just give you a better shot at hearing her. The version I gave her was pretty much was whatever scraps she might have lying around the house.”

“Oh... okay. I'm not too sure what that means.”

“Nothing really special. I would lay a few of my tools around the room to monitor the environment. Chances are if something does happen, we'll see it register.”

“Now that I think about it, that would be something cool to get on video.”

“You're right. That can be arranged as well.”

“I figured you would have a lot of equipment like on the shows.”

“I have a few similar toys, nothing really fancy, the cool stuff is kinda expensive. I have just enough to get the job done, and done well.”

A bell rang through the hall to let the herds of students know it was time to swap out the lunch crowds. The freshmen and sophomores had A lunch, others had B (who got what lunch also depended on class schedule). When your group wasn't the one at the cafeteria, you /were supposed to hang out at a class called Advisory. It was probably the most worthless “class,” in the entire building.

What we were supposed to do in that class was either homework or read a book. But there were two problems with that image; the first being virtually none of the morning classes seemed to know what homework even was, the second was only freshmen were forced to read as a part of our English class grade. One thing that some students did opt in for was the essay alternative to the computerized tests on school library books. If you didn't want to waste your time with those tests than you had the option to write a single essay to fill the requirement. However, there was only one person I knew who actually did do the essay alternative, the goofball I was dating.

“Onto the biggest waste of time this school has to offer,” Dakota sighed.

“Whose Advisory period do you have?” I asked him.

“Ms. Nicole, in the home economics room,” he answered, “What about you?”

“Mr. Carmack. We never really do anything in his room, except maybe feed his fish every now and then.”

“At least that is something. Since none of the morning classes ever seem to assign homework, and I always do the book test early, there is nothing to do. I've actually put off doing homework just so I could pretend to have something.”

“I've done the same thing, don't feel bad.”

“I never do. There are just a few thousand things I'd rather be doing

than just sit in there twiddling my thumbs."

"Like?"

"Well as of today, the list consists of; talking with you about whatever random subject pops into our heads, write a novel or twenty, climb a mountain in the nude, catch a movie, build a nuclear reactor with my bare hands, help a friend make a video game play through series online, just something! I'm all for being lazy but when I know there is work needed to be done I'd like to get it done as soon as possible so I can move on to something else more fun."

"A bit impatient, are we?"

"A little. Now we should probably get out of here before that little walk-in closet gets stretch marks because too many people are inside it."

"Yeah, you're probably right."

We both rose from our chairs, joined to each other at the waist, and started to dodge our way through the crowd to get out to the hallway. Some of the other students tried to shove us into walls to keep us from getting through, others were trying their best not to get trampled by Dakota's size 17 shoes (at the time).

"I honestly wish that there was a way we could get out of here," I said. "Trust me, if there was a way I could get us to the south of Paris in the blink of an eye, I would do it," Dakota said. "Paris, Idaho?"

"No, France. A picnic in the Jardin du Luxembourg; a park with many different ponds, fountains, and glorious statues. Just you and I embracing each other's company while exploring whatever remnants of history remain without a worry in the world. A chance to create something even more special."

"Oh, wow. That is pretty deep."

"You're surprised at that? Oh, you haven't even seen my best work."

"I don't know if I should be excited, or scared at that," I joked.

"Let's see how it turns out," Dakota smiled, "We might just become immortal."

"What do you mean?"

Dakota's class for Advisory period was closer to the lunchroom than mine. He peered inside his class and sighed deeply. We kept walking towards the end of the hall, where my class was.

"Just maybe you and I will make something that will something that helps a part of us live on," Dakota tried to explain.

"Okay... I'm still not sure what you mean. I honestly don't think I would want to be immortal," I said, "Is it even possible?" Dakota paused for a second, possibly because he realized what he was saying didn't make much sense.

"I don't know what I meant, to be honest. I have a tendency to do that, be worried if it actually happens. Sorry," he tried to explain, "But truthfully

there is one way to become immortal, through art."

Dakota and I stopped in front of my Advisory classroom before the conversation could continue.

"Well, it looks like a half hour of Hell is about to start," I said.

"No kidding," Dakota chuckled, "Guess I'll see you in English afterward." Dakota gave me a gentle hug and kiss on the forehead before letting me go. I walked into class while quietly waiting for someone to comment on what was going on between Dakota and me, but without much success. Only one person commented something to the effect of our substantial size difference making Dakota and I a cute couple. Not much else happened, which lead my thoughts to go back to what Dakota was saying about immortality. Was it even possible? Did Dakota have some sort secret that made him immortal? Bull! If he was immortal, what the hell would he still be doing in high school?

He has made it very clear that he didn't like school, more along the lines of the people he was stuck with (which about 99% of the time I agreed with him). So what was it? Did he know about a fountain of youth? Did he have some sort of elixir of life? I had to know what was going through his head. Why?

Well, think of it this... Has anyone ever pointed out something to you, that you never noticed? Something that had been going on for so long you never really paid attention to it, thinking nothing of it at all? Then, once someone says something, you CAN'T stop thinking about it? I can imagine whatever you are thinking of probably didn't have some sort of superpowers influencing the way you thought about it, but you can probably get pretty close to how confused I was.

I HAD to talk to Dakota about this. Not through telepathy, but in person. Thankfully, my thoughts let me skip ahead in time so Advisory wasn't as much of a drag. The bell seemingly rang sooner than it was supposed to, letting everyone free to move to their next classroom.

As I got out into the hallway, I found Dakota just standing as he scanned the crowds to look for me. I shot my arm in the air and waved it back and forth to get his attention. Yeah, I could've tried mind-talking to him but I figured he would have trouble distinguishing my voice from the others. Eventually, he noticed me waving and started walking my way.

'Is it just me, or did that period go a little fast?' he asked.

'I'm glad I am not the only one who noticed. I needed to talk to you about something,' I said. He picked up his pace so he could meet me at my side. A smile was plastered on his face like he had just won some sort of grand prize.

"What did you want to talk about?" he asked.

"What you said earlier about being immortal, for some reason I can't get it out of my head," I answered.

"Oh? That could mean something. It might have something to do with

the Valkyrie situation."

"How so?"

"It could be that a part you has always been alive, and wants to come back."

"How is that really possible?"

"It is weird. All in all, it is difficult to explain really."

"Alright... I guess. The way you were talking made it seem like you had a trick to it."

"Not really, nothing people didn't know already."

"Huh?"

"There is a saying by an Italian poet, I believe his name was Antonio Porchia, that stated, 'One lives in hope of becoming a memory.' Essentially he was saying we never truly die until the day comes the memory of us is gone."

"Okay, I think I understand a little better. So what, you are saying is that as long as there is something that helps keep the memory of us alive, we basically become immortal."

"Yep! For every paint stroke, every sentence you weave, every dance you do, every person, to every little breath; those who are born with creative talents have a higher chance of essentially living a very, very long life."

"Oh, I see now! That is actually kinda cool. I just wish I had the talent to do something like that. I wouldn't even know what to make."

"Well, one thing that seems to work with most creatives is basing their work on what they know. An artist may paint the landscape in which he or she met their one true love. A writer may piece together characters based on his enemies and find clever ways to end their lives. All the best comedians lay their best material from true experiences in their lifetime. The worst of criminals have their immortalized passages built before them without having to lift a finger. All you would have to do is find some sort of inspiration."

"I don't really want to use what happened with my step-dad as inspiration for anything. The ass doesn't deserve the privilege!"

"I agree with you, whole heartedly. Hey, if you decide to do anything at all, that is all up to you. I'll help out where I can."

"Well, thanks. But how what would you suggest? So I could find something to write about."

Dakota and I took one of the back ways that lead to "The Triangle," so we could avoid the crowded hallways.

I never really noticed something about the other students until Dakota mentioned it, just about every single one of them stayed on the pavement the entire time. Almost like those little robots that can only follow the path drawn by a special marker, everyone else in the school (even the teachers) stayed on

the pavement when they went outside. And they had the nerve to call Dakota weird?

"Why not come with me on a case?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" I replied.

"I mean, come with me on a ghost hunt. You'll have so many stories to see and witness for yourself. Plus; if you are interested in history, forensics, image editing, or psychology you can get some first-hand experience that no textbook can show you."

"Really? It takes THAT much work?"

"More if you count maintenance, marketing, social media, public relations, and client relations. It is a business, no matter how you look at it. There is a lot that can happen."

"I bet," I said, "You know what... it sounds fun. I'm in."

A smile grew, nearly taking over the entirety of Dakota's face. I could hear him internally shouting in the excitement that someone was finally going to join him during his nightly adventures. To be honest, the idea of looking around for ghosts at night did actually sounded like it could be fun. You never know what types of things you might find!

"Awesome!" Dakota nearly shouted, "If you would like, you could help me sort through the last bit from my last case. I have it mostly done."

"Really? I thought that part of the job usually took a couple weeks."

"Normally it does, but thanks to my limitations, it cuts out a lot of work."

"Well, that sucks. There could be something the cameras could've seen that could prove something."

I was trying to impress Dakota early on when he first brought up the idea. I wanted him to think I had already had some knowledge about the whole paranormal thing.

"Let me guess, you've watched some of the ghost hunting shows," Dakota said.

"Yeah," I replied, "Is that bad?"

"No, not at all. It was how I put everything together."

"I thought you said you had a mentor?"

"I did. But he didn't come first. Basically what I did was take mental notes from the shows on television about what I should do and what gear I should get then adjusted to what was needed. My mentor came in when I started getting cases that dug themselves deeply, basically someone to show me the way in and out without falling."

"I see. That is interesting. So what could happen if something were to go wrong, specifically in the areas you needed a mentor for."

“You could lose the wrong soul, forever, essentially putting them into a sort of coma or worse.”

“Wait... the things you do... can kill?!”

“If things go too far, yeah. But don't worry, legitimate situations like that are extremely rare. In fact, true hauntings only happen five, maybe ten percent of the time. Crazy stuff like they show in movies only happens roughly one percent of the five percent of the overall activity. And that alone is being generous.”

“Wow, is it really that rare? Then why do it if the chances aren't so good.”

Dakota paused just before the door to go into the hallway leading to our English classroom. He looked me dead in the eye as other students walked right past us. It seemed like Dakota was grabbing onto the world to stop it in its tracks just for this moments.

“Two reasons. Number one, to help someone through a situation few people actually understand. Number two...” he said.

“What?” I whispered. Dakota took a quick gulp before getting ready to speak again. A couple tears started to appear in his eyes. He leaned in for a long slow kiss as if he was trying to let me know what he was about to say.

'To take the chance to make something amazing happen,' we both said in unison.

“Exactly,” he whispered, “That is what I live for.”

The bell screamed at us to make sure we hurried to class. Our time outside was running short, and if we were late it wouldn't be long before the teachers would give us trouble.

“I guess we should get going,” he whispered.

Dakota and I hurried to our English class and into our seats so our teacher could start the class. Nothing really important happened in that class, or anything involving school really. The jerks that harassed Dakota and me for being together eventually faded away and left us alone. We did eventually go see that movie and it was actually really good. I was surprised someone as young as Dakota could figure out how to make superpowers seem real.

Soon a few weeks passed, and I was allowed to go back home with my mom, even though I chose to stay with Dakota some nights. I helped him wrap up the footage from his first ghost hunt, which he took out to his grandfather alone. I had to deal with a family wedding that weekend.

A few weeks later Dakota came to me with a follow-up case at his grandfather's work due to an incident that allegedly took place in the main office. Apparently, the spirits were so pissed off about him being there, they literally took a shelf off a wall and threw it at Dakota's grandpa. What made him so mad, was the fact his grandfather was bone-thin due to cancer treatments. I guess I could understand why he would be so upset. The case itself was rather

boring.

Now, on a side note. I know my husband didn't mention this in his book or the case the next chapter makes up, but stick with me. Somehow, this will all eventually make sense.

But back to the follow-up investigation. At first, it was rather exciting to be able to be a part of this, but during the case, nothing really happened. The very air in the place felt quiet and still, like a little kid praying to turn invisible because their parents found out about their misdeeds. Dakota was pissed the entire time, which I honestly expected something to happen to get him to shut up his words of torture, but again nothing really happened. For the first few hours, Dakota was with me just to explain the process and have me become familiar with all of his equipment. Since he didn't have anything really fancy, it was all quite easy to learn.

After it got to be around 11 o'clock at night Dakota suggested that we actually start rotating positions, one of us stay to watch the computer monitors and the other walk around. He even gave me the directive to just use whatever equipment I felt was needed in that moment, as he called it an exercise of woman's intuition.

After a few more hours, we decided to end the case on a deal. Dakota devised the idea to make a “spirit” set off a motion alarm. Basically, the deal was formed under the terms that we wouldn't return to bother them as long as they never tried to harm anyone in the building ever again. Within seconds, not even letting Dakota finish, the alarm was triggered and we went home. A week passed by as we looked over every aspect of the materials we collected, and very little “evidence” came up. So, we were able to quickly shelve the case and move on. Though it didn't take long for something to happen to change everything.

Chapter 23
The Exorcism

It was the middle of June when it happened, the case that changed everything. I know this portion of the story wasn't mentioned by my husband, I honestly don't know why. Maybe it was out of respect for everyone that was involved, I can't be too sure. Dakota tries to keep the details about it quiet, to this very day.

You may think because we were practically one mind I would have some indication of what goes through his head, but he was more experienced in creating illusions. Personally, I think it is fear that kept him from telling this story. Whatever the reason was, times weren't as “pleasant” as Dakota made it seem. If I remember correctly, it happened on June 3rd.

Dakota and I were on summer vacation from school. On top of taking requests for ghost hunts, and other types of cases, we were planning our own little events to keep each other company. When not on the job; we would catch a movie, have a picnic in the park, grab lunch at a random place in town, and occasionally make a trip to visit natural areas like deep woods and waterfalls. There wasn't much to do in our part of Idaho, so we made the best out of what we had. We were having lunch at a grill about a mile from a nearby bridge, popular with bungee jumpers when we got the call.

The restaurant was part of a chain that was the closest thing to a fancy dinner setting people in Idaho knew. It started out as any normal day as Dakota and I was talking about life in general between every bite we took. Dakota was sinking his teeth into a large barbeque bacon burger, with some of the side of fries smashed between the meat and bun. I had large nachos with extra peppers and salsa.

“So, are there any movies coming out you want to see?” Dakota asked.

“Not really. I kinda figured you would want to catch that new superhero movie that just came out today,” I answered, “Maybe make it a date at the drive-in this weekend.”

“It is getting kinda scary how well we know each other,” he laughed, “Yeah I would like to see it. It's kind of a sentimental thing.”

“Oh? How come?”

“My grandfather got me hooked when I was really little. And now that he has been dealing with cancer, and some parts of me worry he is about to lose that battle, it has become a bit of a connection to him in case something goes wrong.”

“Ah, that's sweet, Dakota.”

Adorable red tints on Dakota's cheeks seemed to warm up the restaurant. I loved I was able to always get him to that, but this time the joy was short lived. Dakota's face suddenly dropped from the playful goofball I always knew to the serious investigator I came to know. He started diving through his pockets, very rapidly, to get out his phone. His phone wasn't making any noise, it wasn't even rattling like it was on vibrate, yet Dakota seemed to panic like an important call was coming though.

“I really need to take this,” he said, “It may be a job.”

“How do you kn...” I was interrupted by Dakota's ringtone. He immediately answered the call, becoming even more serious once a robotic woman's voice began to speak. He took the phone from his ear, typed in a series of numbers, and waited a couple seconds.

“This is Dakota Frandsen,” he said. A panicking woman on the other end of the call made Dakota jerk. Something was definitely going on. A couple minutes seemed to fly away as Dakota was trying to speak to the woman on the other end.

“Alright, Mrs. Grimm, I need you to try and stay calm. How long has your daughter, Samantha, been acting like this?” he asked her. As I heard her try to explain the situation even further, I felt Dakota start to connect with me mentally so he could pass on a message.

'Do you have your phone on you?' he asked.

'Yeah, why?' I replied.

'Something is going on that I want you to hear. Remember how I said that the hauntings shown in horror movies only happen one percent of the time, out of the five percent of real activity?'

'Yeah?'

'Based on what is going on in the background, this is the one percent.'

“Okay, I have that information recorded. Now, if you don't mind, I would like to get a close ear on Samantha and have a colleague of mine listen in just so we have a better idea of what is going on?” Dakota asked.

"Yeah, that is fine," Mrs. Grimm said calmly, "Is there anything I can do to make sure I don't get hurt?"

"There is," Dakota answered, "Get yourself a glass of water and add about three tablespoons of regular table salt. Be sure to mix it up."

Mrs. Grimm became too quiet for me to hear directly. But the rings of my phone quickly told me I would soon know more. I quickly answered, and kept as quiet as I could be to avoid causing problems. Something about the very way sound traveled made it seem like something Inhuman was taking over. There was a fight coming, and something deep inside my gut told me it was darker than anything I knew, something worse than any Hell I knew.

"Alright, I did it," Mrs. Grimm announced, "May I ask what does this do?"

"Essentially, it is a recipe for holy water. If your daughter is having some true issues, this will keep her at bay. I hate to say it like, but in some ways, it will act as a bug repellent," Dakota said.

"Holy water? Won't we need a priest to bless it?"

"No, ma'am. We won't need a priest to come in. You just called one."

'You're a priest?!' I nearly screamed. Dakota nodded his head in response. He was revealing another special surprise before my very eyes. I was dating a priest. The next thing I probably found out was that Dakota was also a trained swordsman at the rate he was going.

"I specialize in 'disaster relief' moments," Dakota said, "Very few investigators have my resources."

"So I've heard," Mrs. Grimm said, "I've heard a lot about you."

"Then I guess you know that my colleague and I will need to come in as soon as possible. Time is of the essence."

"Please do. I am running out of options. I'm afraid of my own daughter. What should I do with the water?"

"Keep a good image of your daughter, one of her at the happiest she's ever been. If she comes near you, imagine this moment is in the water and washes away the negative energy."

"Don't you have to recite some sort chant first?"

"Just do what I said, it'll keep her at bay. If she talks, don't listen. If she attacks, don't be afraid to defend yourself."

"I can't hurt my daughter."

"I know," Dakota sighed, "I'm not asking you to hurt her, I'm asking for your help to help her. Any sign of fear and the slightest bit of hesitation could put your life in more danger. I'll be able to get to your home in ten minutes. Just follow my instructions and you'll be fine till then."

"Okay, I'll trust you," Mrs. Grimm, "Sydney mentioned you were

pretty smart about this type of thing."

"You're daughter was right. I'll see you in a few minutes." A roar on the other end of the line caused Dakota to cut off the phone call and get ready to practically fly out of the restaurant. Our meals were finished for the most part, and normally he would try to save what we couldn't eat so we could snack on leftovers whenever we needed to, but he looked like he didn't care if a meteorite struck the building, he had to get to the client.

"Check please," he shouted, "And can we get the rest to go?"

"Dakota, what's going on?" I asked him, "You're scaring me!"

"I'll explain in the car," he answered, "Right now we have to move quickly."

"Alright, alright," I said, "Just relax."

Dakota hurried over to our waitress and paid for our lunch before escorting me out of the building. I could feel his heart rate getting faster with each step, naturally making me very worried. When we finally got into the car, Dakota took a moment to collect his thoughts, giving me the opportunity to learn more about the S.O.S we received.

"Dakota, is everything alright?" I asked.

"No, one of my old cases has come to bite us," he said, "I have a really bad feeling about this one."

I could feel a sense of dread coming from Dakota. This was one case he was genuinely afraid, more so than any other situation I've seen him go through.

"What's happening?" I asked him.

"Remember how I told you Kristen was the target of a supernatural attack?" Dakota asked.

"Yeah," I answered, "Is there something else? And now that I think about it, didn't Macy Delevign go crazy and start ranting that some being named, 'Eliminos Ra,' was going to kill everyone?"

"She got that name after one of her experiments went wrong. She and three other girls were there that day, each one acting a little different after they swore they saw something approach them. Macy kept ranting the name and the others started to isolate themselves from the world. Macy Snider, acted as if she was hallucinating. The client's daughter, Sydney, was the worse of them. If this is legit..."

"Dakota, what's going on?!"

I could see a look of dread start to engulf Dakota's entire soul the moment he stopped. He knew something was going to happen, and the very possibility of whatever he knew being the very problem we faced, shook him more than anything else that I've ever seen.

"Dakota, if I'm going in with you, you need to tell me everything. I

can't be let in the dark about stuff like this," I told him.

"When I first heard the name, Eliminos Ra, I immediately saw these flashes," he begun to explain, "I was with four others. I never heard their names or got a good look at what they looked like, but I saw they – better yet we – were brutal. We used swords and powers to slaughter hundreds. Men, women, children... it didn't matter, we took pleasure in their screams. Four of us looked human, but the fifth that seemed to lead all of us... he looked like some creature from the deepest pits of Hell. His skin looked like solid rock. Every part of his body seemed to emit a bright, burning light, as cracks in his skin would appear. He looked like an over dramatic volcano that was about to erupt. He was even worse than the rest of us..."

"Dakota, you don't mean..."

"I'm not sure what this means. I just know that there may be more trouble than we realize."

"What would we do if it does get worse?"

"We'd have to bring in everyone. Everyone that was at the ritual, and their target."

"Wait, wouldn't that put Kristen at risk?!"

"Yeah, I am getting the feeling they will try to kill her as was intended."

"What the HELL?! After what we did to her?! That's like asking the families of the March plane crash victims to hop on the jet after the funeral!"

"I know it's wrong but there isn't much choice if it goes down that route. I'll have a backup plan to keep her safe, by it won't look like much."

"No, no, Dakota, NO! We can't do it. We can't let anyone gets hurt, even if it is someone like Kristen."

"She won't get hurt, I'll make sure of that much. But she will be needed to change this."

"How?"

Dakota simply shot me a glare that told me everything I needed to know. No, he wasn't threatening me, he was pointing out Kristen was basically a sacrifice. Though I noticed something different in his eyes – it was like another being was inside Dakota, waiting to be unleashed against the new threat. Something was going to happen in this case, something to bring out the beings Dakota mentioned in his visions. Dakota started the engine and sped through traffic as quickly he could without crashing into other cars. I was surprised he didn't use a car trailer a semi was hauling as a ramp, that was how crazy he was driving. He was going to do anything and everything to save the day – it was one of the reasons I loved him, his willingness to do anything to help anybody even if it meant putting his life on the line.

Though, thinking back to that day, I realize that Dakota never asked

Mrs. Grimm for her address – he just knew it. And if he had an assault rifle in hand, he would've slammed his entire body through the front door of the Grimm House. My heart was feeding off his energy, spinning adrenaline through my veins. This was going to be intense. When we got to the house, Dakota was pure business. He wasn't the lovable big guy that would never hurt anyone, anymore – he was a soldier waiting for a battle. The way he jumped out of the car and charged the house felt like a SWAT raid – except he was the battering ram and the entire squad in one body, he could even out shoot anyone he came across.

Maybe if he had a gun on him, he would've breached the house like he was a cop. Without any word to me, he walked right into the house. The front door was unlocked, which Dakota did hesitate to go through until the sound of animal-like screams shook the very foundations of the building.

"What the HELL?!" I screamed.

"Exactly," Dakota joked. Dakota hurried inside the house and started moving frantically to find the source. The screams continued to amplify. I stood outside the house, too afraid to move forward.

"Fuck you, priest!" screamed an animal-like woman.

"BRING IT, BITCH!" Dakota roared. I started to walk inside the house, to get a better view of the "demon" we were facing. I knew Hell because of my stepfather, but I was too curious to not take a look inside and face an actual being from there. Was there a difference between the evil that was the product of my past and a demon? As Dakota screamed while flying through walls of the entry hallway, I got my answer as something fly through the air like a leopard pouncing from a treetop. I immediately froze in fear at the creature I saw.

It looked human, but... I barely know how to describe it now. Bits of the girl's flesh looked both torn and burnt. Her skin was pale and bubbling. I could barely hear Dakota mumble something as he tried to recover the blows to his head, but as he spoke the demon's flesh continued to react as the bubbles exploded into waterfalls of black blood.

"You can't bring the little cunt back, priest, she is already dead," the demon taunted.

"You obviously have no clue who I am," Dakota responded as he seemingly made himself levitate with a wave of his hands. Vibrations in the air, moving like a desert mirage, encircled Dakota as his heart began to race. Two balls of energy emerged from his chest, one light and one dark, and manifested into two nearly identical copies of Dakota.

"Eliminos..." the demon whispered.

"No, not quite," said Dark Dakota.

"But we'd love to meet him some day," said Light Dakota.

"Shut up, you idiots and help me get her restrained!" ordered Dakota. All three Dakota's moved in unison to attack the demon. The two –

doppelgangers I guess – moved so quickly they only looked like blurs. Dakota began reciting a chant in Latin, which appeared to work like a sleeping pill by subduing the possessed one. I thought that by knocking out the demon that possessed her, Sydney would be able to peer through... that wasn't the case.

“Is she dead?” I asked Dakota.

“No, she is just taken a hostage,” he answered, “But as you probably have figured out by now, negotiations will not be easy.”

“What do we do?”

“That will depend on you. Because I have a feeling this will be rough, I'm gonna let you have a chance to get out of Dodge before things get started. But if you choose to stay, you will need to listen and do exactly as I say.”

'Wait, you're going to give me an out? Wouldn't something follow me?' I asked him telepathically to avoid frightening the clients even further.

'There is a good chance we are going to get followed no matter what we do. If we leave, something will come to poke fun at us. We stay and win this fight, something will retaliate,' he answered, *'Unlike what movies show, this is war.'*

“I'll stay,” I said without giving it a second thought, “You'll need me.”

Dakota gave a small smirk before he turned to face Sydney, or rather what was left of her. He took a deep breath in just to relax his mind and body, so he would be able to move forward without any emotion which could compromise the incident.

“What do we do now?” I asked him.

“Analysis and quarantine. Lock everyone inside, and find out how fucked we are,” he joked.

“This isn't really the time for jokes.”

“I know. I'm just calming myself down so I can think better.”

“Alright, so what do we do?”

“We need salt and a lot of it.”

“What? Wait, you mean salt circles actually work?!”

“Yes and no, they can help the situations but they are far from a cure all like Hollywood thinks.”

“That is interesting. But shouldn't we ask Sydney's mom before we do anything?”

Dakota's eyes immediately widened. “Where is she?” he asked.

“Wait, WHAT?!” I screamed.

“Sydney attacked the second I walked through the door. I didn't see her mom at all.”

I shut the door behind me as I hurried through the house. Dakota

moved just as quickly in areas opposite of where I looked. The home was a single story building that seemed to combine both colonial and modern styles of decoration. There looked like nearly a dozen closets, a couple pantries, and several hidden crawlspaces. I kept getting this sinking feeling in my chest our search wasn't going to turn up the best results.

The very sound of a leaky kitchen faucet made me paranoid I was going to walking into a fresh pool of blood at any second. I moved closer to the sound of the water, picturing that Sydney attacked her mother while she was following Dakota's directions, like a lion being lured out by poachers.

'Shandra, we got a problem,' Dakota warned, *'I found a body.'*

'Please, don't tell me,' I begged him.

'Not human... canine. Sydney killed the dog. As for her mom, she is badly beaten. Thank god she was an only child.'

'What do we do?'

'We've got to get the police in on this.'

'Whats going to happen?'

'If we're lucky, we can get Sydney pardoned under insanity, and she will have to stay within a mental health facility.'

'I thought you couldn't plead insanity in Idaho?'

'You can't, but you can be deemed unfit to stand trial. But we don't have a lot of time to discuss the law. Mrs. Grimm's injuries can be fatal if she doesn't get medical attention soon.'

'How can you tell?'

'The bones are supposed to be inside the body, just for starters.'

'No, please, say no more.'

Flashing red and blue lights filled the house as they invaded through the windows. Several clicks of firearms and radio static could be heard through the walls, warning us of the approach of several assholes who would shoot first and ask questions later. No offense to any members of law enforcement reading this, but it seems like too many of you just don't care.

'Start scrambling for medical supplies,' Dakota ordered.

'What?!' I asked.

'Trust me, they're going to come in and try to shoot us before we have a chance to explain. The group that is working right now is under investigation for an assault on a pregnant woman. We've got to overwhelm them and give them no chance to act on the situation. There is a good chance we'll get shot at if we so much as open the door.'

'But... Dakota...'

'Shandra, we don't have much choice. Just keep moving and try to

follow my lead. These are the type of people that made it so the only way to rebel against society is to be a decent person.'

I couldn't say much. Dakota's harsh tone started to intimidate me a bit, but I knew he meant well. I already knew cops were stubborn, and the odds the ones that wouldn't listen to me about my stepfather would be the ones responding were pretty good since we were in a smaller area. God, if they realized who I was...

'We got company,' Dakota interrupted.

I got a glimpse of our visitors Dakota warned about. Sure enough, three police cruisers and an ambulance parked themselves just outside the house, near Dakota's car, and got ready to storm the building. I could hear the clicks of their pistols and the rips of Velcro coming apart on bulletproof vests.

'They're coming in hot!' Dakota shouted. I hurried over to the nearest window and nearly crawled outside just to get the attention of the two guys coming out of the ambulance.

"We need a medic! One adult female is severely injured, open compound fractures," I yelled, trying to use as many official terms I could remember from medical shows, "Be careful!"

The cops eased the tension in their arms and hand as their focus shifted from a hostile raid to a search and rescue oriented mindset (Dakota had an intimate knowledge of law enforcement procedures, and over the years to come he explained how a cop's mind worked in certain situations. A couple times he'd even predict how anything from bomb threats to hostage negotiations on the news would play out before the police would announce it).

"Where is the injured?" one of the officer's grunted as his group barged through the front door.

"In here!" Dakota screamed, "Quit fucking around and get this woman some damn help!"

"Please, I can't take it!" the client cried.

"Jesus Christ," whispered another officer. The cops and paramedics rushed into Dakota's direction. I followed behind them to get a look at how bad Mrs. Grimm's injuries were. A part of my mind still believed that it was impossible for a human to inflict so much damage to another, bones would come out of the skin. If they did, it had to be because they were high on something like meth or what-ever-the-hell fucked up drug was out there.

But to quote my husband, we were entering a world of gods and monsters – there was nothing to prepare us for what truly was going on. No parental advice, no school teacher, nobody other than ourselves could warn us – all they did was get us to see the world is very different from what is inside a textbook. I followed the members of civil services through the house but immediately stopped when I notice large puddles of fresh blood, quickly spread along whatever surface it sat. I wanted to vomit.

“What the hell happened here?” asked one of the officers.

“My daughter... something is wrong with my daughter. It's like she's possessed,” Mrs. Grimm tried to explain.

“She called me in when her daughter started going crazy,” Dakota added, “When I got here, she immediately went after me.”

“What? Did you throw her through the wall that was messed up?” one of the officers joked.

“No, Detective Marks, she threw me,” Dakota glared.

“Watch your mouth, Frandsen, unless you want me to put a bullet through it,” Marks grunted.

“Detective, that is enough!” shouted another officer, “Dakota, where is this woman's daughter?”

“Sydney is in the other room, I had to subdue her. Drugs or demon, I had to take her out.”

“What? Had to smack her around?” Marks scoffed.

“Listen, needle dick. There is no excuse for a guy to hit a girl but when she is on a self-destructive rage and TRYING to kill, something needs to be done. There is no fucking reason why anyone should try and hurt another individual, but there is every reason imaginable to defend one's life. You keep bitching at me, your motherfucking throat is gonna get bitten off by a ninety pound teenager!” Dakota growled.

Deep, hellish, laughter seemed to erupt from all directions in response to Dakota's rant. I froze in place and felt the room start to get excruciatingly hot. Everyone else acted like they were feeling the intense heat as well.

“What the hell is happening here?!” asked Marks.

“Get ready,” Dakota whispered, “She's coming.”

A whimpering sprang up behind me. It sounded like a girl, about my and Dakota's age, crying after she witnessed a horrible incident.

“Please, help me, they're trying to kill me,” the voice cried. I turn to face the source of the voice, it was Sydney! She looked pale, weak like she had been starved for days. The marks from her possession disappeared, like whatever demon took control of her was gone.

“Shandra, walk away from Sydney... now,” Dakota ordered.

“Why?” I asked, “She's starting to look better.”

“That is it, you're coming with me,” Marks barked while whipping out a pair of black handcuffs.

“The priest is coming with me,” Sydney screamed, “ALL OF YOU WILL DIE!”

Sydney grabbed me by the throat and tossed me to the side as she

charged at everyone trying to help her mother. Two of the officers drew out their service weapons and opened fire. Dakota ducked away and charged past the demon and came to my side.

"Are you alright?" he asked. I nodded. I was sore, but the damage could easily have been worse. All my bone were still covered with skin. He carefully lifted me and hurried out of the house. I could tell by his heart rate, he was more concerned about me than anyone else in the room. He set me down near the barricade of cars outside of the house and kissed me on the forehead.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asked me.

"Yeah, I'm okay. You've got to help them!" I told him.

"Not yet, they'll be able to hold off for a bit. I need you to do something while I try to contain the situation."

"What?"

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. He turned the screen towards me, squeezing the volume buttons to show the screensaver – a photo of us he edited to make it look like we stood as divine beings in front of a galaxy.

"I need you to call both Macys and Kristen. Try to convince them to come here as soon as possible. I have all of their numbers saved in case something like this happened," he explained.

"I will. What are you going to do?" I asked.

He looked back at the house, where shouts and gunshots could be heard blowing around with screams and shatters. It sounded like a tornado was rushing through a zoo filled with hungry animals. A bit of fear appeared in his eyes just before he allowed his alter-egos to take over. I could hear several voices in his head debate whether to stay with me or to storm the house to attack the demon. The latter decision was favored as Dakota looked back into my eyes.

"I am going to stop this," he whispered. As he pulled away, I grabbed his wrist to get his attention just so I would have a chance to beg him to change his mind.

"Please, be careful," I cried. He leaned in for what seemed to be the longest kiss we ever shared. As his lips pulled away, I could hear the voices in his head trying to encourage him to respond, just so he didn't feel like he would lose me because of this battle. But, I was more afraid of losing him. This was a war. He may live, but the parts of him that I fell in love with could have died that day. His kiss felt like his way of saying that he would, but the three words he said after made me lose control of what little tears I was holding back.

He said, "I love you," for the first time since we started going out. After he said that, I lost it. Tears spilled down my face like a large waterfall as he ran back inside. '

"I love you too," I cried. I took a deep breath to try to calm down, but my efforts were pointless.

As I started to hear Dakota start shouting from inside the house, I hurried through his contacts and call everyone he said through a conference call. Immediately they all knew something was wrong and tried their best to get me to relax when they couldn't understand what I was saying.

Soon, I mustered up the air to say what they all needed to hear.

“Sydney... is... in trouble. Dakota... needs... help,” I choked.

Everyone froze.

PROOF

White Suicide

PROOF

“For the last FUCKING time, Simmons, I don't know why those girls are dead. Instead of trying to gnaw at my ass about the case, why don't you ask that freak of nature, Frandsen!” he screamed.

“Detective Marks, I am trying to figure out why two young girls are dead and YOUR fucking prints are on the weapons used in their deaths,” I explained, “Cooperate with me, and we might be able to save your ass. You and I both know what happens to child rapists in prison, just IMAGINE what they'll do to you when they realize you're a cop.”

Marks gritted his teeth and clenched his fists. The poor asshole had a very well known and documented temper that has gotten him in trouble over the years he has been a police officer. But for some reason, when officer Jerome started working with a young ghost hunter, Dakota Frandsen, his rage seemed to be lured to the kid like a horny teenagers to the lead cheerleader.

I've spoken to him on a couple occasions, and he is surprisingly well versed with police and forensic protocols, which made him valuable for various domestic assault cases as well as when a case would take... unusual turns. It has been made clear that Mr. Frandsen was involved in the situation, and it was his convincing that made us look into these girls a bit deeper.

His “gut” feelings or psychic insights or whatever it's called... they alone wouldn't hold ground in court but his reputation for spotting details veterans in the force missed gave us enough reason to check into it. Being that the deaths occurred in private residences, that was the loophole we needed to launch an investigation. The families were naturally distraught about it all, but the confusion in everyone was enough convincing for them to cooperate. Marks was the unfortunate bastard that everything pointed to, despite efforts to find other possibilities.

“Alright, fine,” he sighed, “What do you want to know?”

“Just start by telling me in as much detail as possible what happened that day,” I answered, “Feel free to peak through any notes you may have if you need to.”

“Fine,” he grunted before drinking out of his one and a half liter of soda. Those things are popular, making for an easy pickup to get through long ass shifts. I could see the look in his eyes as the day's events replayed in his mind. Something about the way his face twitched at seemingly every other detail made it evident he was unable to process the events that took place.

In truth, I've had a gut feeling more would come from those very events. I was taking detailed notes to get something together just in case I was right.

“At 1130 I was wrapping up a vandalism case, just a bunch of stupid kids messing around. After taking them to the detention facility, things seemed calm so I made a run to a deli to grab lunch. I figured since the Canyon Falls High School kids were out for summer break, and that was a popular spot for them to go during lunch, I wouldn't have to deal with a line. Of course I

should've figured my wishing for a quiet day was going to be pointless," he said.

"Steve, doesn't it always?" I joked. Marks gave a slight chuckle before continuing.

"Just a little after 1200 hours, I get a call from dispatch about the domestic in question. It was brought up that it sounded like a mother and daughter getting too rough, so I expected a bit of violence dealing with a hormonal teenager. The caller was the next door neighbor and they reported the situation was heated and stuff was breaking. A male and female arrived on scene as the violence continued and went inside. Other neighbors called in and practically gave dispatch a play by play that was left in the case notes.

"The description of the male figure matched Mr. Frandsen's appearance, and I figured the female was some girl that he convinced to come along for his little 'jobs'. Three other units radioed they would respond to the call, likely under the same assumptions I had. When we arrived on scene, we already knew it was too late for a peaceful ending. We were gonna need that med that came in right behind us," Marks told me.

"How could you tell?" I asked.

"Holes the size of people in the walls, shattered glass, you name it. It looked like a small bomb went off. We didn't move in at first, but the house was too damn quiet for the alleged activity to have taken place. If anything I was praying the damage was done and it was on to fixing up the place. Frandsen and his little girlfriend, were moving throughout the inside of the house, possibly looking for supplies. The girl, I guess her name was Shandra Ford, heard us try to storm the building since she started shouting they needed help."

"What did Ms. Ford say exactly?" I asked.

"She said there was an adult female with open compound fractures and to be careful, using those terms exactly."

"Impressive for a kid her age."

"I figured she was a fan of those medical shows on TV. But back to the case – when we entered, we saw that the inside of the house was just as bad as the outside. In my previous years as an officer, the most I've seen go through a wall was a microwave and a couple knives, but the damage there had to have been done by something large. Parts of me immediately wondered if Frandsen ended up through the walls, somehow."

"Did he?"

"It wouldn't have surprised me. He was partially covered in dust and wood chips, and the floors didn't look like right. Something broke through the walls like a linebacker.

"But when we got through the door, we were immediately asking about the injured. I heard Frandsen scream from another room to get our attention as a woman's voice followed. Both sounded like they were is distress. The med units followed us through the house as we looked to see what had been done. Sure

enough the poor woman was so beaten it looks as if she was mauled by a bear.

"I started interrogating Frandsen on the spot. Naturally I assumed a big guy like him was beating around on both the mother and daughter."

"Why did you assume that?"

"BECAUSE SOMETHING IS FUCKING WRON... sorry. I guess the damage was just too severe for me to imagine anything else."

"What was it that gave you the idea the situation was any different?"

"When deep animalistic laughter surrounded us. Sounded like shit from a horror movie! What were the odds the place was rigged like a Halloween attraction? There were no canines on the premises, at least living ones. The dog looked like it was ripped up by a bear. Something was going down. Mrs. Grimm told us immediately her daughter was responsible for the damage, after that everything moved so fast.

"The daughter appeared in the doorway of the room, and she looked horrible. When I saw her, I started to freak. The weird laughter suddenly stopped, right as my mind realized what was happening."

"What happened?"

"She attacked us, even Frandsen ran off. He carried out his little girlfriend out of the warzone as we opened fire. I swear all of our rounds hit that... THING and it wouldn't go down!"

"Was it drugs?"

"I thought so at first, that was the only thing that could explain it. A ninety pound teenage girl with the strength of thirty linebackers, wouldn't fucking die despite all of us emptying our clips into her, that was the only thing that made sense!"

"Naturally, but what was it that gave you the idea that was something of the supernatural?"

"When Frandsen stormed back in doing the whole, 'power of Christ compels you,' bit."

"He started to perform an exorcism?"

"If that is what it's called, then yes he did. Whatever he did, it worked."

"So Mr. Frandsen starts to chant some abra cadabras and the girl goes to sleep?"

"Yes. It was what we needed to de-escalate the situation. Once things calmed down, Mr. Frandsen gave us a run down of how to continue."

"You didn't bring her in?"

"If you shot a cougar with a tranquilizer dart, and the damn cat was still kicking, would you want to haul it away? The med units took Mrs. Grimm to the hospital immediately as Frandsen began briefing us. He essentially told us we needed to tie down the girl and wait for someone else to arrive. I radioed

dispatch to let them know we were going to be there a while."

"The someone else, would it be Macy Delevign, Macy Snider, or Kristen White?"

"How 'bout option D: all of the above."

"Why were all three there?"

"The way Frandsen put it, Sydney Grimm and the two Macys got into some demonic voodoo shit in order to attack Ms. White. White was apparently the 'stuck up bitch' girl that harassed everyone to the point then tried to take their own lives."

"Is that where she would have gotten the idea to take her own life?"

"Probably. Dakota basically took matters into his own hands to remind Kristen of what she was doing, well, more along the lines of what her deceased brother would've thought. It was really a sad story, about to get a whole lot worse."

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah, why?"

"You just referred to Frandsen by his first name."

"The kid scares the hell out of me, but even I got to admit he is good at what he does."

"Apparently so. But please continue with the story."

"Right..."

He took a deep breath before taking another drink from his soda before continuing. The air in the room seemed to turn heavier. I've heard countless horror stories, it was all part of the job. Every now and then, one could easily hear about incidents too freaky to really write off as drug related; hence why it would be safe to say a majority of cops were at least open to the idea of the supernatural.

"When the girls arrived on the scene, I tried to radio into dispatch about what was going on. Interference made our radios damn near useless. Naturally, they were on edge once they saw we had Sydney Grimm cuffed and bound to a chair. Dakota took things further by digging out some rope and tied her to a pipe heater that was in the room.

"The girls immediately panicked when they saw what was going on. Understandably so, the poor kid looked horrible. As soon as the ritual started, things got worse."

"How so?"

"Ever burn yourself and get the blisters that start to bubble after a day? Imagine the bubbles the size of baseballs and instead of puss, there is blood that smells like raw sewage. Imagine screaming that sounds like mutilated cats at every second, at such a high pitch windows shatters."

"Fuck..."

"The neighbors came over threatening to call the police, obviously too fucking stupid to tell our squad cars were there. The ones that did, tried to threaten police brutality lawsuits. Soon they started to run back into their homes. We had to focus on the Grimm daughter, otherwise, things would've turned to even more bloodshed. Kristen immediately became distraught. Dakota kept trying to push her forward, constantly reminded her if she didn't focus more people could end up dead."

"You're kidding..."

"He was rough. The bastard started turning into a drill sergeant during the heat of the moment. All of his little girlfriends started getting upset with him but they held out. I almost socked him a couple times but once I saw the condition the Grimm girl was actually improving.

"Her voice started to change into that of a normal teen girl, the blood-blister-things cleared up, she started to look healthy! Things looked up, the exorcism looked like it was working. Then the fire started."

"I saw the photos. The marshal couldn't ID the cause."

"It is because spontaneous combustion is still considered a myth. The fucking flames came out of nowhere, Dakota said it was the 'demon's' last stand."

"What?"

"The fire started by itself and went out in a flash. But the room got fucking hot! I swore I saw metal fucking melt. Something was not right. But whatever was going on seemed to improve. The situation was getting better."

"Except two girls are dead and a third is in the hospital."

"Once things ended, everyone was distraught. That type of thing takes a toll. I never realize how much of a spiritual warfare it was, let alone believed it was real. I thought this shit was fantasy." The room around us became hotter.

Marks started to get nervous. "Feels like the damn thermostat is busted again," I said.

A shadow appeared inside the room, one that made both Marks and I jump.

"Keep telling yourself that, you fat pigs," it growled.

"Who the fuck are you?" I yelled.

"Simmons, that is Kristen White!" Marks screamed.

"I thought the poor girl slit her wrists and hung herself!"

"That is what I wanted you to think..."

Marks and I drew our service weapons and opened fire. The image of the girl still haunts us to this day. The others in our department don't believe the incident ever happened. But to this day it scares the shit out us, on top of the

random chaos that has been happening lately. But the one thing that bothers me the most, is what the demon girl said.

"Bother any of my sons again, you will be entrapped in the deepest pits I can find."

PROOF

Rise of the Valkyrie

PROOF

Chapter 24
Hope...

It has been a week since the funeral. Dakota has barely been able to act the same since the exorcism, and to be honest neither have I. Somehow we managed to stick together through this mess, but little did we know that a much more significant mess was coming our way. I should've known that it was only the beginning of a much more massive storm.

Kristen White and Macy Delevign committed suicide about a week after the exorcism of Sydney Grimm, both citing the event as the reason behind their harsh actions. Macy Snider also tried to kill herself but was caught and resuscitated before it was too late. She is spending time, along with Sydney Grimm, in a mental institution until further notice. A cop looking into the incident also died due to suspicious circumstances, though we think it was unrelated to the event.

Kristen and Delevign cut their wrists and hung themselves while Snider overdosed on pain meds and drowned herself in the tub. Because the families knew their deaths were tied, a joint funeral with Dakota being kind enough to speak at the ceremony was planned out. The families held up pretty well during the entirety of it, especially since both received 6-hour old messages online by the time their bodies were discovered. I remember his speech almost verbatim.

“Some of you, by now, have probably heard the rumors that I was involved in the exorcism both of these beautiful ladies claimed was the reason behind their choice to leave this world,” he said, “In respect of the souls in which now hide in the shadows to watch over their loved ones they left behind, to the others involved and for the sake of those whose tears shall grant for a better future, be it in this life or the next, I will neither confirm or deny these

allegations. All I will say is that I've seen enough of the lights inside their eyes to know that this sunset shall end with a starry night.

"It is no secret that many who knew Kristen didn't like her personality, but yet many still respected her. Perhaps it was due to the fact everyone on some level knew that Kristen was still in pain from the loss of her older brother. That alone showed that she might have had walls around her, once she let you in, her love was so profound that every part of her had some hand in holding it together. Being able to feel so much love for someone like that is such a rare gift that many would consider it a curse.

"Macy, on the other hand, took the opposite approach for what she loved. She embraced the world as it was and tried to see the best in everything; if she had a hard time finding that good, it seemed like there was no extent she was willing to ignore to help it become better. She genuinely cared about everyone that knew her, and everyone cared about her as if she was their sister. She had the potential to take on any cause she wanted to change the world and make enough of an impact to last centuries.

"Both of these souls are a true loss to this world, and tonight we say not goodbye but rather, 'see you later,' for in time we shall see them again."

I could barely hold myself together during it all. Dakota's words were kind, but the whole thought of the funeral altogether bothered me, just knowing I was part of the reason they were dead. I know it wasn't my fault but… I just don't know. The entire thing was just confusing. The more cases Dakota took me on, the more worried I became. I tried to help with getting cases; then one came along that brought back more of my hell. One of the ghosts from my past, Alice Greene, suddenly came back into my life after being slaughtered like a pig by some sick fucking psychopath.

Richard Simon, a warehouse warden who had a secret basement he violated and maimed several girls until their bodies became cheap horror movie decorations. That son of a bitch kidnapped and attacked one of my best friends, Jessica Summers, as you would've known if you read Dakota's book. But, before I go too far, let me start from the beginning.

On June 20th, 2011, Brianna watched as Jessica was kidnapped as they were getting out of a summer school program, to get ahead in their school credits. Dakota hated school, so the very thought of doing summer programs for anything other than what he was working on at the time was out of the question. But it was nice to spend time with him without lugging around textbooks. I tried to encourage him to expand the horizons of the "group" since more and more people started to join us on cases. One thing I tried to push was using a supernatural assist to help find missing people. He kept shooting the idea down, getting madder each time I mentioned it. I would ask him why he kept saying he wasn't going to deal with putting lives at risk when he would get something wrong.

Regardless, when Jessica went missing, the big guy was needed. It was

common for Dakota to be often used as a one-man construction crew because of his size, but few people knew about his eye for detail. He could probably see something others couldn't. In fact, I knew he could, but as Dakota made it clear in his book, he was still very much against the idea. Come July 17th; he didn't get much choice.

I went to visit Brianna just to check on her; she was a horrible mess. There was a park near the mall she would always visit whenever she felt upset, and Jessica or I would usually find ourselves walking her out with bribes of sad movies and chocolate ice cream. I could always see her practically in the same spot each time I had to go. When Jessica went missing, Brianna was worried to the point of physical illness - bone thin, skin almost ghostly white, the areas around her eyes nearly entirely black, it didn't help she started using drugs a couple of days after Jessica went missing.

My mom dropped me off at the park so I could find her. All I had to do was follow the literal trail of tears to see her.

"Is there anything on Jessica?" I asked her.

She shook her head in silence. I sat next to her to try and comfort her, but couldn't do anything to help her.

"How long has it been?" I asked.

"Three weeks. No one knows whether or not she is dead," Brianna whined.

"Bri, you can't think like that. Jessica will be okay; she will survive this. You know it just as well as I do that she will make it. You have to have faith."

"No, I don't know I can, Shandra! I can't take this, anymore, I just can't!"

"Listen, I know someone who can probably help find her, but I need your permission to get him to help us."

"What do you mean?"

"I know someone who can help find Jessica; he isn't a cop or anything like that. He is someone cops go to for help on cases like this."

"Like what?"

"When things get desperate, he has been known to help turn things around. He has yet to lose anyone."

"I don't know, but I'll try anything. Is it some old guy?"

"No, he's our age. He's my boyfriend, the one that helped me get away from my step-dad."

"No possible way, how can someone our age do that?"

“He is an interesting guy. His name is Dakota, and he’s…”

“Wait, is this ‘Dakota’ the big one?”

“Yep, that'll be him. I thought I told you that was his name.”

“Go ahead and get him. I’d trust him with this more than anyone else.”

“Okay, I’ll let him know.”

I pulled out my phone and started texting Dakota information about what was going on. At first, I tried to word it like I was just needing advice on handling a friend’s problem and would try anything he recommended to help. After a couple of minutes, I asked him to give me a call to pitch the case. Immediately my phone rang, showing a photo of Dakota, I took while on our only Bigfoot case we did in the mountains. He knew where a possible family of Sasquatch was located and took me up to “introduce” me to them, and the photo is one I took when he spotted a juvenile trying to spy on us. But that case doesn’t matter anymore.

“Hello,” I answered.

“Hey, it's me,” Dakota replied, “What's going on over there?”

“Listen, I think I got us a case. But I’m not sure about what is happening.”

“Okay, just tell me what you know,, and we will go from there.”

“Alright,” I whispered, “Like I already told you, a friend of mine has been looking for her sister who was kidnapped a couple of weeks ago. Police have come up with nothing at all and are coming close to calling off the search. She is worried sick that the worst has happened.”

“That is not good. But it has nothing to do with what I do. I can maybe put out a few notices online, but that is it.”

“I know, I know. But look I thought we could do something more than that to help out. I hate to see her like this.”

“Shandra, if you're talking about having me use my gifts to look into it, you have to remember some things can go terribly wrong in the process. I don’t want an innocent death on my conscience!”

“I know, but please, Dakota, we have to do something to help. I can't just hold back everything knowing that there is a way to help people when all else fails. I need to do SOMETHING to help her!”

Dakota paused for a moment. I could hear his pulse from his temples start pressing against his phone. I knew I was getting through to him - even when he was absolutely pig-headed, I had ways to swing him in my favor. He had all these rules he would follow when he needed to put up a fight, many of which I knew I would be breaking by bringing this up.

"Alright," he sighed, "I will see what I can do. But we all need to meet in person."

"I kinda figured you would say that. We are at Lincoln Park, just across the street from the mall. Please hurry."

"Okay, I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Be careful. I love you."

"Love you too."

The second my phone turned off, I could hear engines screaming nearby. A drag racing ring was in town, so at first, I thought it was one of them. Further small explosions and a large dark figure walking up to us, however, unveiled a much more dangerous race was taking place. Sides of Dakota even he was afraid of would emerge, the very things he was scared would show and scare me away. I'll be honest, parts of me wondered if I should've left him after this happened, knowing that sometime soon I would be bound to him by the time Olivia was born. Dakota could've easily turned against me and become just like my step-father, but it was a risk I was willing to take to help my friends. But I knew that leaving him could take Olivia away, or maybe replace her with a new kid; I don't know…

"Hello, Brianna, it has been a while," whispered a familiar voice.

Brianna and I both look up to see Dakota standing over us,

"Dakota. What... are you doing here?" asked Brianna.

"Shandra told me I needed to come by to help. Though she never really indicated it was you I'd be helping, not that it matters right now."

"Okay… but what can you do to help? The cops can barely do anything."

"A few things, believe it or not."

"Brianna," I whispered, "You need to let him help you. He can do things that no other person can. I've seen it for myself."

"What does she mean, Dakota?" Bri asked.

Dakota got down on one knee and braced his arm against his still standing leg to hold up his weight. He started trying to dig into her mind to "sway" her into being more cooperative. "Do you remember why we broke up?" he asked.

"No," Brianna moaned, "You never gave me a reason. You just kinda disappeared."

"I disappeared 'cause I felt things between you and I would be short-lived, plus it never really felt like you supported me in any of my ideas. Many of which brought me here."

“Dakota, you kept saying that you had all of these powers and I said you should've been medicated. All of your ideas were insanity!”

“Let's just say I wasn't telling you everything and what I kept from you has gotten stronger. I kept pursuing all of what I had talked about and more.”

“I don't care anymore. Can you find Jessica?”

“Stick out your hands, and we'll see.”

Dakota’s once arched back stood up straight as both of his hands approached Brianna’s as if to ask for a dance. Brianna was reluctant to grab onto Dakota’s hand until she saw my head nod in encouragement. I watched as Dakota’s eyes twitched as his tired eyelids focused the mess in Brianna’s mind. Almost instantaneously, he looked like he witnessed the entire event. His fists started to clench.

“The license plate you saw was 2-T-3-6-I-G-D, right?” he asked

“Yeah.. how... did you...” Brianna whined.

“No time to explain,” Dakota interrupted, “Who is the officer that responded?”

“Jerome, why?”

Dakota’s fists clenched tighter, summoning storm clouds above our heads. He was getting pissed. He stopped breathing as every muscle in his body seemed to tighten and grow. The look in his eyes was dark, making the tired blue pools in his eyes blacken. No stars would appear in his eyes to show hope for a new day, but rather the smog and muzzle flashes of war burned the whites of his eyes dark red.

“I think I might be able to pull some strings to get her back,” Dakota replied.

“I don't care what you do, just get her back,” cried Brianna.

“Will do,” Dakota growled.

Dakota started to march away, but I had to speak up before he left. I knew something about the person that took Jessica.

“Dakota, please… please, please be careful,” I begged him.

“Shandra, don't worry. We already know that I make it out of this alive. Our daughter is enough proof of that.”

“No, you don't understand! About two years ago a friend of mine was taken, almost exactly like the way Jessica was taken.”

“What happened to her?”

“About a week later they found her body. Whoever... they… just please don’t do this!”

I lost control. Dakota was about to sign his execution order and not even care. I couldn't feel the connection we had to one another, the one that let me inside his mind. It was like he was a total stranger, with lead barriers surrounding him. I couldn't help but collapse thinking that I was going to lose him, and Olivia.

"I have to do this. There are still many things about me you don't know yet."

"Please, Dakota, I don't care about that stuff. It is too dangerous."

I felt his hand gently lay on the back of my head. Feeling like a movie in a DVD player, I could feel him searching my mind for the moment that I feared would have already happened to Jessica, and what I thought would happen to him if he went through with it. He quickly found the information on the day I found out my old friend Alice was horrifically murdered.

The second I felt the sensation of Dakota digging through my mind faded, I had to ask him if he saw it happen.

"Yeah, now I get why you don't want me to go," he answered

"You're still going, aren't you?" I moaned.

"Whoever is doing this needs to be stopped, you just gave me more reasons why," he answered.

I knew I wouldn't be able to talk him out of it. That stubborn ass (I love him, but I'll admit he can be an ass at times) wasn't going to be easily swayed, and likely get himself killed in the process. I couldn't stop him, and on some level, I didn't want to stop him.

"Just be careful, okay?" I whispered, "I don't want to lose you."

Dakota kneeled down before me with a gentle smile on his face and whispered, "I don't plan on dying today."

He stood up and walked away - not before mouthing a goodbye.

"I am going to take Brianna home, and wait until you get back with Jessica," I mind-messaged him, "You will get her back."

"Don't focus on me, too much. I love you Shandra, and you know I'll get her back," he responded.

"Dakota, don't… I'm barely able to handle this as is."

"Fine, I'll see you later..."

Dakota hurried to his car and drove off. I still don't know what all happened, other than the bits of information Dakota mentioned in his book. All I remember is how afraid I was for Dakota; afraid of losing him, afraid of losing Olivia, afraid of losing a family…

"Are you okay, Shandra?" Brianna asked.

"Yeah, I am just worried…"

"Don't worry, Dakota will be alright. He promised he is going to check on me later."

"Yeah, I'm sure Jess will be too. We should get out of here."

"Where do we go? There is nothing we can do to help the situation."

"You're right. There is nothing we can do, but let's get you home so when Jessica is found, we will be there for her. Chances are we will have to wait a little longer for Dakota. I have a feeling both of them are going to need us when this is over."

Without any else to say, Brianna got up and started to walk home. I followed her, and stayed as close to her as I could, given the circumstances. I tried everything I could to keep her in good spirits, during the grueling hours that passed by. I could almost hear the commotion in the distance of what could be considered the first act of Dakota's Dynasty.

Brianna and Jessica's house had a sort of country house feel to it. Rose bushes twirled through the foundation of the building, yet strengthening it. It was like a garden fairy's shelter, almost looking unreal. I helped Brianna walk inside, as she was starved and lethargic from her worries. Whatever drugs she got into, didn't help the situation.

"What do you think is happening now? With Koda and Jess?" she questioned.

I focused on that thought as much as I could. The very idea of Dakota brought feelings of adrenaline and rage with hints of panic and guilt. Whatever he was doing was splitting his mind into two. On the one hand, he was a warrior willing to lay down his life to save Jessica - on the other; he was afraid of dying and wanting to run off. It isn't much of a stretch to tell you which guy usually won.

Anytime I tried to contact him through telepathy; a sharp jolt would nearly paralyze me. He was making sure I couldn't see something, and in retrospect, I am glad I wasn't able to get through to him. But no matter what, his silence at the time set me on edge. I didn't have any confirmation from Olivia to know that he was okay, nothing.

To try and divert our worries, Brianna and I pulled up any movie we could find online and started cleaning up all of the sweets in the neighborhood. Several people delivered flowers and gift baskets to try to be supportive of Jessica's family while she was missing. Many of the same neighbors who would've called the cops on the girls when their outdoor heating unit turned on.

Hours, or what seemed like years, passed before an update appeared that settled our troubled minds. Three heavy knocks on the front door scared the shit out of us, causing us to fly through the roof; Brianna was too distraught to answer the door, and her parents were at work since they were in a tight spot

financially to take time off, so I went to the door. Once I opened it, officer Jerome stood on the front porch with Jessica wrapped underneath his arm.

"Jessica! Oh my god!" I screeched.

"Take it easy, Shandra. She's been through Hell," Jerry mentioned.

Brianna walked in behind me and started to cry at the sight of her. Jessica slipped from Jerome's arm to comfort her worried sister. Neither of them wanted to move from each other's comfort and barely spoke a word to each other as they walked into the house. I stared at them, relieved that my friend has come home, but fearing the worst.

"She'll be alright, Shandra. I doubt she could ever fully recover from this, but she'll be okay," Jerome whispered.

"It isn't her I am worried about," I sighed, "Where's Dakota?"

"Why don't you come outside for a minute?"

I followed Officer Jerome to the middle of the yard before he turned to face me, mentally preparing to hear any news he could tell me about Dakota. At this point, I was willing to take the story he was killed by the person that hurt Jessica so that I knew it was all over.

I wonder if this was how my mom felt when she was waiting for news on my dad…

"Listen, Shandra," Jerome sighed, "The situation with Dakota has gotten a bit complicated. Now, what I am about to tell you could get me in a lot of trouble. But, with everything that has happened, I think this is something you need to hear."

"What is it?" I worriedly asked.

"The man who kidnapped Jessica… he's dead. Dakota killed him," Jerome answered, "It is hard to tell now, but it looks as if Dakota broke several of his bones and shot him at least five times. Because of how bad the damage was, Dakota's been taken in."

I couldn't speak, and my heart sank. That was not Dakota. Dakota was not a killer.

"He'll be okay; it isn't what you think. The people that took Dakota in, they know about his situation and will do what they can to make sure he won't be affected by this."

"What the hell does that even mean?! What is going on with Dakota? Did he get hurt?"

"Shandra, just stay calm. Dakota is fine. These people are just concerned about him."

"Why would they need to be concerned?"

"You know about the situation with Dakota's father?"

"Yeah, he told me shortly after we met…"

"Guys who come out of that situation, tend to become serial killers," Jerry interrupted, "Many of the experts seem to think that stuff like comes from them wanting to do something about their parents, to stop them from hurting others, and it transfers into adulthood. Some go as far as saying it is a possibility that the urge to kill won't ever go away until the person that caused them the pain is dead. These people know Dakota fits into this a little too well."

"What will they do to him?"

"Nothing, Don't worry. They're just going to make sure he isn't too affected by what happened. They don't want him to turn on you, or anyone else unless it becomes absolutely necessary. I can't say much more about it," he vaguely answered, "I've got to get out of here, but keep an eye on Jessica for me. She could use some friends right now."

Jerry hurried to his car. I had to stop and think, about everything. Something didn't feel right about all of this. It was apparent I wasn't being told everything. The more I tried to understand what Jerry had told me, the more and more uneasy I felt. I also began to feel like I needed to do something to help Dakota. But there was nothing I could do, except wait. The look in Jessica's eyes was enough for me to tell it was better I sit things out.

Hours later, I had the idea to go outside for a few moments of air, praying that Dakota's car would be parked just outside. I wasn't going to be that lucky. I tried to give him a call on his cell, just to help ease my sanity. The phone kept ringing, and I thought I was going to hit voicemail yet again.

"Hello?" asked a tired Dakota.

"WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?!" I screamed.

Dakota paused. "What do you mean?"

"Dakota, I have been trying to call you for the last five hours. Jessica came home, and she told us that you would check on her, but we never heard a single word from you!"

Another pause. I could hear Dakota mumbling under his breath, but I couldn't make out anything he was saying.

"Fed… in...gate me," he said through static.

"What?" I asked him, "Dakota, you're breaking up. Can you just come here? I need to see you, we all need to see you."

"Alright, I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Please!"

I hung up. I was pissed at him for taking so long to answer the phone,

but I still cared about him. I just wanted to see him. The front door opened up behind me, and Brianna stepped out.

"He's coming," I said, "Dakota's on his way."

"Good. Are you feeling any better of it?" she asked.

"A little, knowing everyone made it out okay. I just can't believe what all is happening, and to be honest, I get this feeling it isn't over yet."

"Shandra, everything is going to be fine. We're all on edge, just come inside and wait for Dakota to get here. He won't stray far knowing something is bothering you, trust me."

"You're right."

I followed Brianna inside. I noticed Jessica walk into her room, looking even more tired than before. Brianna and I didn't bother her; she had been through enough without people trying to interrogate her about what happened. The things she must've seen…

A familiar car engine purring just outside the house caught my attention. I peeked outside and saw Dakota's car pull up. He looked like he was talking to someone that was with him in the car but I didn't see anyone. I thought I saw weird… doppelgangers near him that disappeared quickly. As soon as Dakota got out of the car, I felt like I was being lifted off the ground and thrown to him. The next moment, I had him pinned to the ground. I was sitting on his stomach; my limbs draped over his body. He started to mumble, but I slapped him.

"Nice to see you too," he joked.

"What happened to you?" I asked, pissed.

"The government found out about me and took me to some weird facility," he answered, "I was drugged the entire time."

"Don't lie to me!"

"I am not lying to you, Shandra. Check my neck, whoever took me had to drug me to move me anywhere. And it was some pretty heavy stuff."

Dakota adjusted his neck to show me two mosquito bite looking bumps on the bottom of his jaw. I started feeling like a bitch.

"Will you be okay?" I asked him.

"Yeah," he moaned, "It was just something to make me a bit sleepy."

Feeling guilty, and just glad he was in my reach, I had to kiss him one more time. Just to feel his pulse quiver his lips against mine when the moment seemed to drag into pure pleasurable bliss. The one tender moment I started to feel that sensation, I lifted my head for a few moments of air and moaned, "I was so worried about you," before continuing with the kiss. Something in

Dakota's touch, as his arms wrapped around me, told me he needed this moment more than I did. Our lips separated again and our eyes locked before I laid my head against his chest. He started to trace a heart against my temple. His surprisingly tender touch was something I thought I was never going to have again.

"I know," he whispered, "But don't worry, no matter what happens, I will always find a way back here to you."

I kissed him one more time before letting him get up. I stood aside as he looked at the house and found Brianna in the doorway.

"Thank you for finding her," she whispered.

"You're welcome," Dakota grunted, "Is she okay?"

"Yeah, she's alright considering everything that happened," Bri answered, "She's in her room right now."

I followed Dakota into the house as Brianna stood aside to let us in. I watched Dakota's eyes map out the house as he walked towards Jessica's bedroom. Brianna and I never bothered to ask Jessica about what happened, so having Dakota there would help ease our curiosity. When he got to her doorway, he stopped just before the dusty darkness that was inside. Small hair-like particles could be seen floating in the beams of sunlight that broke through the curtains. Dakota knocked twice on the door to catch Jessica's attention.

"Jessica, it's me," Dakota whispered, "I thought I'd come by and check on you."

I thought I saw Jessica shift on her bed when she heard his voice. It was hard to see her at all in the darkroom, with only bright pink pillow reflecting the tiny shreds of sunlight that came into the air. The room started to feel tense as Jessica realized Dakota had arrived.

"How are you holding up?" he asked.

"Fine," Jessica whispered.

She turned her head to the side. Wet tear stains lined up with Jess's bloodshot eyes.

"Jess, it's okay to talk. I saw what happened."

"No, you didn't. You didn't see what was down there."

"What do you mean?"

"You didn't see them. You didn't see their faces as they died. You didn't see the pain in their eyes when that guy would start grabbing us. There was something down there that watched. When one of us couldn't take it anymore, something was there to take us away. Something evil."

"Were they the ones growling when I killed the sick fuck that did this

to you?"

Jessica adjusted herself further so she could see Dakota better. Apparently, she wasn't aware of his … powers.

"How… how did you hear them?" she asked.

"Things have changed, since the last time we saw each other. I see things that other people can't see and quite frankly it is just the tip of the iceberg."

"Is that how you found me?"

Dakota nodded his head, "I get these visions. Sometimes they show me the future; sometimes they help me look into the past. I have a hard time controlling it, but when they happen, it is always something important."

Jessica sat up and moved next to Dakota. Somehow Dakota was starting to make her feel better about the ordeal.

"But why me?" Jess asked.

"Grab my hand, and we will see," Dakota said, holding out his left hand.

Jessica grabbed the hovering hand and squeezed. Dakota's eyes started to twitch. His mind began to get images, probably of the future, I tried to dig into what he was seeing but had no luck,

"What is it, Dakota?" Jessica asked.

"Well," he sighed, "It looks like you might be needed in a few years."

"Good to know," Jessica said as she smiled and wrapped her arms around Dakota before she whispered, "Thanks… thank you for everything."

"Hey, you're finally up," Bri cheered as Dakota returned the hug.

"Thanks to Dakota," Jessica smiled.

"Yeah," I laughed, "He can work miracles if you let him."

Dakota started to blush. It was nice to see everyone smiling, even Jessica. We all spent the next few hours, or what felt like seconds, catching up on lost time until Jessica and Brianna's parents showed up. Brianna had called them earlier to reveal the good news, but it took them about three hours to get home from Salt Lake. An anonymous tip told them that Jessica was spotted near her grandparent's house, causing them to check it out personally. Of course, it was a pointless trip.

When they got home, the emotions that run can only be compared to coming home videos featuring soldiers. A family was reunited after a tragic event. Scott and Natalie Summers got to see their eldest daughter alive. When they crashed through the front door, there was no stopping them.

"Jessica!" they both wailed, "Are you here?"

Jessica tackled her parents. Brianna soon followed her to join her family group hug. Dakota took me under his arm as we admired the picture perfect moment. I even took out my phone to capture the joyous reunion. It felt amazing to be a part of it. It took a few moments before Mrs. Summers gained enough courage to ask the one question most parents in their situation would. The police were honest about their suspicions of Simon, not a usual tactic.

"Jess, I thought weren't going to see you again," she whimpered, "How did you get away?"

"Dakota…. Dakota came for me," she answered, "The guy that took me is also dead."

Mr. and Mrs. Summers lifted their heads to find Dakota and I standing back and admiring the scenery. They both started to wipe their eyes before mustering up a "thanks," for the guy that brought their daughter home.

"Dakota, long time no see," Mr. Summers smiled, "How you been?"

"Doing alright, I'm just glad Jessica made it," Dakota answered.

"Thanks to you," Jessica added.

"Yes, thank you, Dakota," Mrs. Summers said, "You've helped keep this family whole for some time."

"I am just doing what anybody would. And I would love to stay and catch up some more, but I do need to go take care of a couple of things so I should get going."

"Yeah, but before you go, I need to talk to you about something," Mr. Summers said.

Mr. Summers followed Dakota outside. I could overhear the conversation between them through Dakota's telepathy. Somehow it was inspirational.

"Hey Dakota, I honestly can't thank you enough for helping Jessica," Nathan said, "But I have to ask you something, something I'm a bit embarrassed to ask."

"Go ahead, Nate," Dakota said, " It's the least I can do."

"I hate to ask but, I know you're into that supernatural stuff, why do you think Jessica survived? The odds for her to come back home were near impossible!"

"You and I know that Jessica is too stubborn to go down easily. Likely she gets that from you."

"More her mother, but don't tell them I said that. What I meant was, is there any special meaning behind why she would've survived? If the situation

was half as bad as it looked, well, I was starting to guarantee I was going to lose my daughters."

"Mr. Summers, there is no direct answer to that. Maybe she got lucky, or maybe she is meant to do something later in life. It is hard to say."

"Well, what do you think it is in Jessica's case?"

Dakota took a moment to think about his answer. The words that followed sprouted from a singular thought in his head, "hope."

"In Jessica's case, it is a point I try to emphasize for a lot of the girls I help. The reason why they would have survived is not only due to the fact they had the strength to, but that they have the strength to help others going through similar fates.

"I only caught a glimpse of the things Jessica saw down there, and to be honest, I never thought she would be able to take on something that horrible. But, she did. She may look fine, but there are scars on her that may never heal, but the fact she had that much willpower shows that she is capable of doing extraordinary things.

"Maybe that is the reason she is still alive; she has yet to accomplish what she is capable of doing in this lifetime. To be honest, I hope that our friendship lasts long enough for me to see it. It is a messed up world, and Jessica is about to give people hope. Just keep an eye on her, she went through a lot, and it would be near impossible for gods to stay the same after seeing what Jessica saw. I'll stick around to help keep an eye on her, just in case, but I believe she will overcome this."

Tears started to sprinkle my eyes. Both Jessica and Brianna saw the beads as they hugged my cheeks and smiled as if they also heard Dakota's kind words. He was right; the fact Jessica survived what she did gave us all hope for the future. But it wasn't long before the hints of faith that held our hearts were distracted by a new tragedy.

Chapter 25
...LOST

Jessica's dad and Dakota bro-hugged it out just before Nathan walked back into the house. But, for some reason, there was one thing that kept bugging me about the who ordeal. Dakota flat out refusing to help find Jessica when I went to him about it. When I was outside, I saw Dakota start to walk away as a wind gust stirred up around us. From the tiny slivers of his eyes, a look of total focus and rage began to boil. Something was on his mind, and I couldn't help but wonder if it was because of me.

“Hey, can we talk for a minute?” I asked him.

“Sure,” he whispered, “What's on your mind?”

“Not like you can't tell for yourself, can't you?” I joked.

“Most days I could, but I am still trying to process everything.”

“I bet. So, despite that, is everything alright?”

“Yeah, it's fine.”

“Are you sure? I'd understand why you'd be upset now but when I asked for your help earlier but... you seemed kinda ticked.”

“It's nothing, Shandra; I wouldn't worry about it.”

I don't know why I started to feel enraged at him when he gave me that response. I knew something was up and I wanted answers. I wasn't going to let him off. Maybe it was because the way he acted reminded me of my old boyfriends before they would turn on me. For the first time in my life, I felt like fighting back. My fists started to clench, and the wind grew stronger as if I was controlling it somehow.

“DAKOTA, don't you lie to me!” I screamed.

Thunder fired off the moment I raised my voice, making Dakota jump

in response.

“Shandra, I am not lying!” he yelled.

I could sense his heartbeat racing just as fast as mine. Dakota's big pig-head started to show and it very well brushed off on me.

“Yes, you are!” I yelled, “Tell me what is wrong!”

“FINE!” he roared, “You want to know what is wrong?”

Dakota started to bite his lip to the point of skin starting to break. I was so invested in this fight, I blurted, “I'm waiting!”

“You asking me to find Jessica,” he whispered.

“What the HELL are you talking about?” I asked, 'Really? Is he going to use Jessica for this fight? ASSHOLE!'

“The only reason I even came is that I knew it was the Summers you were talking about on the phone. If it were anybody else, I wouldn't have come.”

“Why?! If someone needed our help you wouldn't step up? WHAT THE HELL, Dakota?! I thought that was the whole point of the paranormal thing we do!”

“Shandra, these things aren't always accurate and could get someone killed! I can't even tell how many were dead when I got there!”

“So what?! When someone comes to us for help, we fucking help them!”

“I know, and I would help anybody who needed it but not like this. I killed a man tonight!”

“So what?! That sick bastard deserved everything you gave him and more!”

“I can't keep doing this. I would do anything to help Jessica, Brianna, and especially you! I don't want to place myself in the public eye like that!”'

“What do you mean? Psychics tell people about dead relatives on television all the time!”

“Really? THAT is your argument?! Those morons get things wrong all the time, and everything they supposedly see can be found with an internet search! When they say somebody who was reported missing is dead, they are making assumptions off of nothing!”

“Don't you talk to me like that! You know what I mean!”

“Yeah, I think I do, but I don't have time for this, I have to be somewhere.”

“Fine, go! I don't care anymore!”

“Fine!”

Dakota and I stormed away from each other. There was a yank at my heartstrings as we kept moving farther apart. He got into his car and started to drive away. My head began to rush because I was so pissed. Jessica and Brianna came out to find out what was going on. But what made things worse, was a voice that whispered in my ear.

'Dakota will die. For he is the son of Elimination.'

'What?'

'Dakota will die.'

Jessica and Brianna's hands wrapped around me from behind. The voices in my head stopped talking when Olivia appeared in front of me. She just stood there with tears that nearly matched mine before disappearing. My heart began to race; my daughter was not going to have a chance be born if this went too far. I had to do something about this because Dakota was going to be too stubborn to make the first move. I sank to my knees in fear of what was to come.

“Shandra, what just happened?!” Jessica asked.

“Dakota is going to get himself killed...” I whispered

“What? What do you mean?” Brianna added.

“Dakota is going to do something to hurt himself,” I cried, “I need to call him now!”

“Well do it,” Jessica encouraged, “I don't know what happened to you two but if Dakota is about to do something stupid you need to talk him out of it! He'll listen to you.”

“No he won't, not after this! I've never seen him get that angry. I was scared he would do something,” I explained.

“Scared of him? Dakota won't hurt you, Shandra, if you tell him what's going on! It's about Alice, ain't it?” Jessica asked.

I nodded.

“Just tell him,” Jess insisted, “He'll listen.”

My phone slipped out of my pocket when I dropped to my knees and laid next to me as if it was waiting for me to call him. I picked it up and began to dial. Pressing the outline of my phone case against my ear, I listened to what felt like an eternal chorus of taunting laughter. It felt like I was being mocked. Dakota let my call go to voicemail, adding to the guilt that started to tear into my chest. When the automated lady finished talking, I had to let go of everything I needed to say.

“Dakota,” I whimpered, “I'm so sorry about yelling at you like that. I'm so sorry about the fight. I know it can probably be hard for you to handle what

happened with Jessica. I know it can be hard for you to see that happen, and you probably don't want to hear from me right now but please listen and try to understand...”

Jessica and Brianna tried to help by whispering anything they could think of to encourage me to keep going but seeing Olivia was what helped me keep going.

“... I know you saw what happened to my friend after the guy that took Jessica found her. I just... I just didn't want to lose you like that. I … I want to keep spending time with you and keep moving forward. I know that times are going to be rough, but I don't care. I want to see you, soon. Just don't leave what we have, don't throw this away... please. I can't lose you now; I just can't! If not for me, then for Olivia. I want to meet her someday, and I know you want to as well. Just, please, I need to see you soon! I'm so sorry for everything, just please see me. I love you,” I cried.

Faintly, another voice suddenly appeared near my phone, one I knew would get through to Dakota. “Daddy, please talk to Mommy,” Olivia whispered.

I hung up the phone and sank to the growing weight in my chest. The girls both started to cry after hearing my heart spill for Dakota.

“That.. was beautiful, Shandra,” Jessica choked, “But who is Olivia?”

“Olivia...” I whispered, “Olivia is mine and Dakota's daughter.”

Tears turned to shock.

“What?” Brianna gasped.

“Let's just go inside before you explain, maybe get some ice cream,” Jessica suggested, “There's too much excitement today.”

The girls and I walked back into the house, straight into the kitchen and grabbed as much ice cream we could find. This became a ritual for when one of us had issues with guys, and to be honest; this wasn't the first time Dakota was the guy we were bashing.

Sitting down for our therapy session with Ben & Jerry; Jessica paired up with a strawberry blend, Brianna hit a rocky road, I took in a vanilla blend. Our spoons starting to dig in at once, and everyone's heads began to focus on the bit I let slip about Olivia.

“Shandra, are you... did you... with Dakota?” Jess asked.

“No,” I whispered, “Not yet at least.”

“Then how do you two have a daughter?” she asked.

I glanced over to Brianna to see why she was so quiet. Her heavy brown eyes were fixed on me the entire time, with an endless barrage of questions rolling through her head. It almost felt like she knew what I was going

to say. I took a deep breath and mentally prepared myself for the questioning both sisters were going to put me through.

"It's hard to explain, and you'd probably think I was crazy. I thought I was too when it happened. The only thing that helped me think I wasn't was..."

"Dakota saw her too," Brianna interrupted.

I nodded.

"But, how is that possible?" Jessica inquired.

"I don't know. The only way Dakota can think of is some freaky time travel."

"Well is there anything this girl, Olivia, told you two about how she was able to do it? Did she only appear once? Does she talk to anyone else?" Jessica continued to ask.

"She's made appearances several times, for both me and Dakota. In fact, she was with us when we went out to the lake. She's in a couple of the photos!"

Brianna jerks out her phone and starts to examine the screen thoroughly. "I KNEW I saw a face there!" she screamed.

She held her phone out, pointing to a light blue spot right behind Dakota and me as we were lounging in the lake. That was right where Olivia was and, with enough eye focus, that was where her face was revealed. Jessica stared in amazement.

"Shandra, she's beautiful," Jessica mumbled.

"Thanks, she is," I cried, "And I want nothing more in the world than to get to meet her."

Both Brianna and Jessica leaned in to give me another hug.

"You will get that chance," Brianna whispered, "You just have to wait it out."

"Trust us, Shandra," Jessica added, "Dakota always finds a way to make up for his mistakes."

As if to alarm us of what was to come, a Chihuahua puppy from next door started to bark intensively. Brianna and I brushed it off, but Jessica became suspicious of the commotion.

"Hey, why don't you two get a movie started up? Something to help get our minds off of the drama. I'll go check to see what Rocket Jr. is yapping at," she suggested.

Bri and I shrugged it off and cradled our ice cream as we started looking for some movie to watch. For some reason the internet connection was spotty so streaming something online was out of the question. I found an old

rom-com titled, “Promises of Paris,” and suggested it to Brianna. My eyes started to fixate on the credits section on the back of the DVD case when I thought I saw a familiar name.

“Dakota!” Jessica nearly screamed, “You nearly scared me to death! What's up?”

Jessica was standing in the front doorway, slowly shutting it so her sister and I couldn't hear the conversation. My head was still spinning from all of the earlier emotions otherwise I would've tried to reach out to him telepathically.

Brianna gave me a slight nudge and whispered, “Told ya,” as she put in the movie. Lights from the menus danced around the room. I tried to get a closer listen on Jessica and Dakota to see what was going. I guess it should be worth mentioning that Jessica was the type to try to conceal her feelings no matter how traumatic the situation was at the time. When I heard one of them jump, I finally peaked through the window to see what was happening. Dakota and Jessica were wrapped in each other's arms. Tears on Jessica's cheeks told me she had let go of some of her pain. Dakota even had a few tears starting to spill, but a piece of paper in Jessica's hands told me something else was about to happen.

Jessica soon separated from Dakota and started to walk back into the house just after waving goodbye to him. Dakota got back in his car, not realizing I was staring and drove off. Playful suspense started to build as Jessica revealed a broad grin on her face as she held up the note. Confused, I looked to Brianna for some clue but was met with a similar smile.

“About time,” Brianna simpered.

“About time for what?” I asked.

“It's like I said, Shandra,” Jessica giddily hummed, “Dakota always tries to make up for his mistakes.”

Jessica handed me the note and sat close enough to see the contents. Brianna scooted over as well, curious to see how her old boyfriend's tricks may have changed since she was the recipient. What was held inside the rose framed letter, left us all with warm hopes for what was to come.

“Shandra,

“How is it that an angel from heaven can shred the very threads of my heart with a single tear or leave footprints in the meadows covered with cherry blossoms from a dream? Please do not cry over our times apart for if there ever comes a journey, I must take, and you are not able to join me, it will only serve as my reason for coming back so I could be in your arms. No matter the distance I must travel, no matter the trials I must endure, no matter the foes I must face I will always find a way to be at your side. The future has already come to greet us in the form of our beautiful angel. When she is paired with you together, your eyes sing a sweet melody that stops the world. You illuminate the

darkest of worlds and the very privilege to see the lights that dance within your heart is the very last sight I wish to see if ever I should once again meet Death and finally leave. But regardless of what happens; be it if I am surfing the Heavens, battle the flames of Hell, or meet the day where I rejoin the fabrics of the cosmos I will always find a way to be around when you need me. I am forever yours, my Cherry Blossom.

"Dakota"

"He's improved," Brianna complimented, "He really must love you."

My cheeks blushed too intensively for me to say anything. Dakota had a way with words, and it was never much of a secret. Everyone knew when he wrote; he meant everything he said.

My phone started to ring. My mom's photo appeared on the screen, somehow not warning of the terrible news she was about to share.

"Hey, mom, what's up?" I asked.

"Shandra, honey," my mom stressed, "Where are you?!"

"I'm over at the Summers' house, Jessica's back!"

"Oh! That's awesome sweety; I hope she is doing okay now."

"Yeah..." I told her, "Is something going on?"

"I don't know what, but you may want to turn on the news," she replied, "Is Dakota with you?"

"No, he went out..." I answered, getting increasingly worried.

"Turn on the news. There were several explosions not far from the house; gunshots went off... I think Dakota's in trouble!"

Brianna, overhearing the conversation, ran over to the TV and flipped the channels to find something that resembled what my mom was talking about. Channel 4 had a series of bright flashes strobing across the screen from cell phone videos bystanders sent in. It sounded like one of the reporters was trying to comment on what was happening, but everything they were showing was too gruesome for words. Bright flashes of light seemingly caused nearby cars to explode, creating large pools of red to splash. It looked like a scene from a bombing raid. Through the flashes and smoke, at least three large silhouettes could be seen rapidly moving around.

A bright flash of light shot six fireballs in every direction, burning through anything that came in contact with them. The smoke started to settle as police lights flickered on the screen. It looked like cops, firefighters, and paramedics from all over the state came crashing in to find out what was going on. They all aimed their weapons at one man that was in the middle of the street.

"Shandra... honey," my mom gasped.

I guess you can probably figure out who that man was in the street, and possibly how potent were the drugs in the tranquilizer dart he was shot. The news anchor cut off the video from the scene as Dakota collapsed, seemingly wording something to the officer that shot him.

PROOF

Chapter 26
“I don't want to lose you...”

Jessica and Brianna, already suffering from a catastrophe of their own, spent the rest of the night trying to console my fears of losing Dakota. The following couple days, my mother tried to do the same but was only met with the same conclusion. I wanted, I NEEDED, to know if Dakota was okay. I guess I got a little attached to having him around. It became apparent the day I finally saw him wandering around a graveyard. I didn't stop to think twice about why he was looking at the graves, I was just happy to finally see him alive.

The days he was gone, I would find every excuse to go by his house to check to see if he was there. His car was still parked in the driveway, but it never moved an inch. The place looked like Dakota had left for vacation, and someone was coming by to keep an eye on things. The mail in his mailbox was being picked up, food was being put into the bowls outside for the strays, and I swore I could see people on the other side of his curtains; but I could never get into the house.

When I finally found him, my mom and I were driving by his house to go to the movie theater. I probably came close to causing a car accident when I screamed Dakota's name, making my mom slam on the brakes. My feet nearly glided through the intersection as I kept screaming Dakota's name over and over again, each decibel seemingly falling upon deaf ears. He continued to stand like he was the personification of Death, himself. My feet soon froze once I could read the engravings on each tombstone he was focused on.

MACY DELEVIGN

KRISTEN WHITE

ABIGAIL LIN TORRES

HOLLIE MCRAE MOORE

PHILLIPS SIMMONS

RICHARD SIMON

ANDREW MARKS

SAMANTHA WARREN

ISABELLA ORTH

JULIA GOODWILL

PAISLEY CHRISTIAN

'You really shouldn't be around me,' he whispered, *'I just keep hurting more people. I really don't want to hurt you.'*

“I'm not afraid of you, Dakota,” I sobbed, “Just please talk to me! Where have you been?”

Dakota turned his head to the side and said, “I wish I could tell you.”

“Dakota,” I said creeping up to his side, “If this is going to work between us, you need to let me in. Whatever it is, we can work it out together.”

I put my hand on his shoulder, knowing he would try to throw up a wall. His entire body relaxed the moment he felt my hand. I walked up closer to him, just to get a better look at his face as tears started to form in his eyes. His fists clenched, his breath intensified, the wind started to stir, and his heart started to race as every inch of Dakota's skin turned a burning bright red.

“I killed a man, Shandra,” he growled, “I killed a man in cold blood and I enjoyed it.”

“Dakota...” I whispered.

He flipped his entire body towards me. His fists and teeth clenched tighter than I had ever seen them, and he slowly started charging me.

“I killed a man and I enjoyed it. I enjoyed watching his body become limp; his body crunching under my fists. I felt more powerful than I ever have in killing him and that scares the shit out of me. I had to become the monster I swore to never become in order to get Jessica out of there and I couldn't save any of the others. Hollie, Samantha, Abigail, all of them were already dead. I couldn't save them! More people are continuing to die and I can't save them! More people are going to die! The very monster I swore never to become is the one thing I need to become in order protect the people I love and that is the very thing I am afraid of. I am afraid I am going to kill someone I love...”

Dakota dropped to his knees with his head hunched over. He kept mumbling to himself, under his breath, the same phrase over and over again.

“I don't want to become like him, Shandra. I don't want to become my father. I don't want to hurt people, but everything that's coming will give me no choice!”

I raised my hand and slapped Dakota across his face.

“Shandra!” screamed my mother from behind us.

“Dakota, listen to me,” I whispered, “Did you hurt Jessica?”

“No.”

“Brianna? Hollie? Macy? Any of those girls Simons killed?”

“No.”

“Exactly. You don't hurt people unless you have to do so in order to protect someone. You're a hero. You're a fighter. You are one of the strongest people I know, and people need that strength. More people need to be like you or at least have someone like you in their life; someone who isn't afraid to beat the Devil with his horns. Whatever is coming, we can handle it together!” I yelled.

Dakota froze as he seemingly was absorbing what I had just told him. He looked up with his tearful eyes as he let out a quiet sigh and nodded.

“You're right,” he whispered, “Thank you.”

Dakota glanced back over to the gravestones as his mind still lingered on the notion he could have done more to prevent those deaths before he looked back at me and sighed once more. Seeing him like this made me feel inclined to at least give him a hug. In retrospect, I see now the reason why Dakota and I grew so close is that we were both searching for someone to hold on to in times of chaos; somehow finding such hands with the intent of healing instead of harming. Rather than be two crazed clowns causing destruction, we were angels still seeking our wings; an idea Dakota somehow convinced me to believe.

Dakota's arms returned the embrace as he stood up, holding me even tighter as my feet were lifted off of the ground. My mother started tearing up at the sight of Dakota and I as if she somehow knew this was the future I was heading.

'I don't care what anybody else says, but you are the most amazing person I have ever met, Shandra,' Dakota thought.

'You say that all the time,' I answered.

'Because you always seem to make yourself more and more amazing the more we are together.'

'Yeah, right.'

Dakota's lips managed to sneak their way to my cheek, making them both blush a cherry red.

“Shandra, honey, I hate to break up this moment but we'll be late for the movie. Dakota, you are more than welcome to join us. My treat!” Mom interjected.

Dakota wiped a couple tears from his eyes.

“Yeah,” he said, “Sounds good. I'll meet you there.”

Dakota stole a quick peck on my cheek before running off to his car. My mother whispered, “I'm starting to think you two were meant for each other,” as she was nearly gushing from what she just saw.

'If you only knew,' I joked in my head.

'Then she would probably think we're both crazier than we already are,' Dakota snickered.

'Shut up,' I blushed.

'Oh come on, you're beautiful when you blush.'

I started to walk back towards my mother, who was just smiling after seeing how Dakota and I acted towards each other.

“What, mom?” I asked.

“I'm just starting to think you two were meant for one another,” she answered.

“You think?”

“You may be too young to really remember but... your dad used to look at me the same way Dakota does you.”

I paused to think about it, and she was right. Thinking of my dad, tears broke through my eyes as my smile grew slightly larger. My mother stepped towards me to give me a hug and get me to walk to the car. As we got into the car, I could almost hear my mom getting ready to tell me a story but she had some hesitation. Her seat belt buckle clicking triggered a start to the story.

“Hey, uh, Dakota's into supernatural stuff, right?” she asked.

“Yeah, why?”

“Well, I just got to thinking of a story your dad told me when we were first going out, and I was going to ask him about it.”

“What story? I might know something about it, Dakota's shown me a lot.”

“Well, I don't really know how to explain it but, there was this story your dad told me when we started dating; he swore it was just a dream but he could never shake the idea it was supposed to mean something.”

“What do you mean?”

“Seeing you and Dakota just reminded me of it; your dad actually saw you in a dream before you were born.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, and I don't know why, but when he said he wanted to do anything he could to meet you... I wanted to do what I could to help him. I know it sounds cra...”

“It's not crazy, mom, Dakota had something like that happen to him.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, but uh... did you ever see me?”

I started to well up a bit as I waited for my mother to muster up an answer. The almost analytical look in her eyes told me she pondered what answer I was looking for when I asked. Truthfully, it gave me time to also piece together how I would tell my mother about her unborn granddaughter making an appearance after both the child's parents tried taking their own life.

“Once,” Mom finally answered, “There was one time, about a week before you born. It was like a... projection because you didn't really look like you knew I could see you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, you were just sitting there off in your own little world. I thought I was going crazy for a bit, but it just made me even more excited to finally get to hold you.”

I paused. A few moments passed before I was able to say anything, promoting my mom to finally start up the car.

“So?” she asked, “Do you know anything about that?”

“Yeah, I do. Dakota and I... Dakota and I both saw a little girl who... well... who will make you a grandma.”

“I guess it is a family gift kind of thing, huh?”

“I'm starting to wonder.”

“But, wait, does that mean you and Dakota had sex?”

“MOM, NO!” I blushed.

“Shandra, honey, it's okay if you two had sex; just be smart about it.”

“Mom, Dakota and I didn't have sex! We've only kissed, that's it!”

“That's what I used to tell my mom,” she joked.

“Mom, we really didn't! Dakota's not even sure why Olivia shows up.”

“Olivia?”

I froze. “Yeah, that's her name. Even though we're not sure of what's going on, we found out her name.”

“How did you do that?”

“We talked to her. She pops up every now and then, mostly when Dakota and I are together; she's even been caught on camera.”

I opened up my phone to find the pictures from the lake date that exposed the relationship to the school, just so my mom could see her unborn granddaughter (god that sounds creepy). Waiting patiently for her to find a parking spot, I found a photo with the clearest view of Olivia's face to show off. The brakes screeched as Mom bumped into the concrete barrier in the parking spot. It wasn't normal for her to do that. As a matter a fact for quite some time before this she really hadn't been herself; her breathing sounded almost asthmatic, she felt dizzy all the time, she couldn't sleep or eat at times, and some days she had a yellowish tint on her skin. I kept telling her to see a doctor but she wouldn't listen, or so I thought.

'You're really going to show her Olivia?' Dakota whispered.

'Yeah, why not?' I asked.

'No reason, I was just asking. Our little angel was just talking to me about how Grandma was embarrassing you. It was quite hilarious to watch her.'

'Oh really? She's just like her father then,' I giggled.

'I guess so. Did you reveal how we were able to see her in the first place?'

“Is that her? By the big rocks in the lake?” my mom asked.

“Yeah, that's her,” I answered.

“So, how did you and Dakota manage to see her?”

'Do you want me to say it or do you want to? I'm right behind you' Dakota warned.

I could see Dakota's large frame creep up to my side of the car from behind.

'I'll tell her. I need to kinda vent to someone outside of your world, no offense,' I replied.

'None taken, I understand. I know it will get overwhelming, be thankful you'll have someone there for you,' Dakota whispered.

'Kota...'

“So, how did you guys see her?” my mother unknowingly interrupted.

“Well, uh... she stopped us from...” I stuttered.

Something in the tone of my voice told the secret for me, as the look of

shock on her face erupted and was further confirmed by Dakota gently nodding his head.

“Oh... was it... him?” she asked.

I nodded.

“Did Dakota make you...”

“OH GOD NO!” I yelled, “It's a long story but no, Dakota didn't make me do anything!”

'Well that was awkward,' Dakota joked.

“It happened separately, then we just got to talking and found out about it after I stayed at his place,” I assured.

“Oh,” my mom whispered, “Okay... you might have to explain it further after the movie.”

'Looks like you might need my help for this one,' Dakota whispered, “So, what shall we see?”

“Well Shandra and I were thinking about watching 'The Last Chance,” Mom answered, “I know it's a chick flick but I think you might like it.”

“Yeah, that sounds good,” Dakota smiled, “It looks funny.”

Dakota opened the car door for me and acted almost like my escort into the theater, filling me with the warm tenderness he somehow still shows me to this day.

As I continue to fill these pages, a random thought has occurred to me that would probably help portray the moments that followed in a much better light than I can provide. A few years after the war began I found a hidden journal my mother kept before she passed away; as a gesture of generosity to those who may not have read my husband's book before mine, beware of spoilers.

For those of you who did read Dakota's version of the events that unfolded, you probably remember my mom had been battling cancer; apparently, when she first found out about the tumors, she started to keep a journal as a therapeutic measure to help her get through the treatments. In fact, what brought me to tears the most is that some that focused on myself were written as letters to someone. I also feel the need to mention that my reference, earlier, to her not listening to going to the doctor was already to the fact she had gone for what she thought was just a simple chest cold.

But, it's too late now to go into grieving. As an effort to hold on to what was left of my mom, I think adding in entries from her journal might do the story justice. The following is dated June 27th, 2011, for those interested.

“Dear Ronald,

"These last few days have been rough with Shandra, as she continues to worry about her friends after what had happened last week. She tells me Jessica has been having nightmares about her captors, and her sister has started using drugs as a way to help cope with the chaos. But, it shouldn't come as a surprise the person she worries about most is Dakota. Him disappearing after the horrible things that have happened has caused her nothing but heartbreak.

"But, a little bit of hope turned up today as he appeared in the graveyard, looking at the graves of some of the poor girls that were killed. She got so excited to see him that she nearly ripped off the car door as I was trying to take her to a movie. She had a chance to finally confront him, and it looked like he needed it just as bad as she did.

"When we finally got to the movies, I couldn't help but be amazed the entire time on just how much the way those two acts remind me of how we were when we first got together. Hell, even they said that there is a ghostly little girl that hangs around them a lot like Shandra did before she was born. I know I probably should've kept Shandra away from him after everything that he's been involved in but something keeps telling me to him is the safest place she would ever be.

"I just hope I get to live long enough to see them what they were obviously meant to be. The chemotherapy starts in a couple weeks, and I can't say I ever been more scared.

"Love,

"Ramona"

Chapter 27
“Just Like Me”

After the film, Dakota offered to treat Mom and I to dinner as he thought it would be a more appropriate setting for the questions Mom had about Olivia. I was curious about how he would explain it, since he himself wasn't entirely sure how it was possible in the first place. The dinner was at a new restaurant that opened in town about a month earlier many of our friends were recommending.

Our table sat next to a large aquarium full of exotic fish and brightly colored flora, making a hypnotic atmosphere. Our waitress sat us, and handed us our menus as we all scrambled to find a good way to start up the conversation that lingered over our heads. Finally my mother perked up, as she sat across from Dakota and I, with an icebreaker to ease us all in.

“So, Dakota, if you don't mind me asking, what is it that made you so interested into the supernatural thing?” she asked, “Shandra has told me quite a lot about you, and you seem to be quite intelligent on the matter.”

Dakota grinned at the compliment as he prepared to tell his story. “Well, the short version is that I've always been a witness to rather unusual events; going anywhere from weird pictures to watching for omnious shadows in the night,” he answered, “I've always had a bit of an interest in it, but I just blew it off as spooky story material for Halloween. However, as our previous conversation may suggest, more become of the stories than I ever imagined possible.”

“Yeah, how is something like that possible in the first place?” my mom added, “That's practically out of science fiction.”

“You're right it is, and that's the troubling part. That, and the fact so many so called 'experts' throw around theories which can't really be proven or

disproven. It makes it hard to sort through it all."

"So what do you think causes it?"

"I believe it all is somehow tied to quantum mechanics; aspects of the universe science has yet, or may even never, be able to fully understand. Once you head into that field, even some of the most genius of minds will admit it all works like magic."

"So, what you're saying..." I interrupted, "Nobody knows anything about it?"

"Yeah," Dakota nodded, "Pretty much. But it is like I'm pretty sure I mentioned to you before, Shandra, it all tends to work like the placebo effect."

"So then, why does it happen?" Mom interrogated, "Does anyone know that much?"

"Well, there's the classic 'meant for a higher purpose' excuse. Other than that, I haven't found any real explanation."

"Wait," I interjected, "If there is no higher purpose to any of this, and it is just random like you say, why do all of the psychics and ghost hunters out there say it has something to do with dimensions coming together... or something like that?"

"Because they're just trying to sound smart!" Dakota joked, "It's like I just said, they try to toss around ideas that can't really be tested."

"That's stupid!" I added.

"I agree," Dakota said, "But, it may be best to careful our wording, I have another case this evening if you're up for it, Shandra."

"Is that what you kids call it now? A case?"

"MOM!" I screamed.

"Hey, Shandra, I said it was okay as long as you were smart about it," Mom joked.

"Dear God," Dakota and I blushed simultaneously.

Our attention was slightly detoured as the waitress brought a cart to our table, carrying our meals. Dakota's long arms helped guide the steaming hot plates to the table as he noticed the waitress being limited in motion as her stomach seemed to balloon from the rest of her thin figure.

"Donna, relax, you have a lot more important things to worry than us," Dakota responded.

"How did yo... oh my god, Dakota! I can't believe I didn't recognize you!"

"Well you looked like you were busy," Dakota joked as he sat up from

his seat to embrace his old friend, “How have you been?”

“Good, good. I had to take up a second job to pay off Sarah's medical bills, but I'm hanging in there.”

“Oh, I heard she had troubles with her appendix, is she doing okay?”

“She is now. We had a little scare because it got to the point it burst, but she is doing better.”

“That's good to hear, the little lady just might be able to do some good in her future.”

“I hope so,” Donna smiled, “I should get back to work. I'll come check on you later.”

“Take care,” Dakota whispered.

Donna walked away so she could continue making her rounds in the restaurant. Dakota smiled as he eyed his old friend walk away. My mother started to draw suspicion from Dakota's intentions, perhaps questioning his loyalty.

“So, how is that you know her, Dakota?” my mother asked.

“She was one of my first clients. Poltergiest-esque activity, dead relatives sticking around, that sort of thing. It was a pretty easy solve, in fact a ghost hunt was not even needed,” Dakota answered.

“How come?” I asked.

“Even though there were supernatural influences, the root cause was a very natural situation. It is sad that it came to it, but at least something could be done to where a happy ending was at least possible.”

“What happened to her?”

“Most recently? She got divorced from her abusive husband, at my recommendation. But, honestly, her story ran a lot of parallels to your own, Shandra.”

“Like what?”

“She fell for a guy a lot like her stepdad. Cheated, smacked around anyone he felt was 'his,' cliché things like that. Her mental state, and the concerns of her two daughters, caused enough emotional disturbance it attracted her lost relatives. Naturally, it was to get her to realize she was in danger.”

“And you just happened to come in at the right time, I'm guessing?” Mom scoffed, “Seems like that happens a lot with you...”

“MOM!” I yelled.

“It's okay, Shandra,” Dakota responded, “And to be honest, yes it happens a lot, but out of everyone here I think you should appreciate that I have

that quality."

My mom shrunk in her seat.

"But, I can promise that situation was quite different than what I treasure with Shandra. Donna was likely to develop romantic feelings; so once I managed to get her to open up and plant a suggestion in her mind, I moved on to the next case. Everything that had to be done had to be left in her control."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"It was in her best interest, and that of her daughters, that they got away as soon as possible. Gather some toys, clothes to last about a week, and find a relative to stay with till things have settled."

"What got her to listen? Or do I need to ask?"

"I leveled with her, told her the exact things to look for if things were going to get worse. When she asked how I knew all this, I told her it was how my father used to behave. Normally denial would've been an issue but Donna used to be an EMT and has seen what happens."

'So, she's just like me then?' I thought, "I see."

Dakota took a sip from his soda to pass the awkward silence that followed. I could sense guilt from what was just said clouding the air near my mother. My hand guided itself to her shoulder to let her know it was alright, Dakota wasn't meaning anything harmful.

"Sorry, it's just that I worry about you two. I wouldn't want anything to destroy what you have," my mother admitted, "You're something else, Dakota. I haven't figured out if it's a good or bad thing, but you're something else."

"I'll be honest, I have been debating that question for quite some time now. But, with Shandra's help and recent events, I know the answers will come to me soon," Dakota grinned, "Despite our 'visitor,' I often find myself praying that I get to experience many adventures across many lifetimes with her."

My mom just smiled.

"If we haven't done so already," I joked.

'If that's the case, you and I might actually be soul mates,' Dakota giggled, "I'm starting to wonder."

Donna made a few more passes at our table as we continued to enjoy our meal, each time taking an extra few moments to focus on Dakota. It seemed obvious she had some sort of feelings left over for Dakota, perhaps being nothing more than an attachment to his help. I wanted to get upset over it, but part of me kept whispering, *"Just trust him."* There were days I couldn't help but wonder if Dakota somehow kept planting thoughts like that to keep me around, yet soon I would find myself feeling the addicting rush from being involved in his adventures.

Dakota finished his dinner about fifteen minutes before my mother and I. He continued to talk about more of his ideas for why certain things took place, and a bit about the case he had that night. We weren't going to walk into the new big horror movie, from how I was understanding Dakota's explanation. As a matter of fact he sounded doubtful of any “true” activity was taking place at all. It seemed kinda pointless to even take the case, but our little “team” wasn't at a point we could deny work.

My mother drove home alone, as I opted in to leave with Dakota so we could get started on the night. I could see sandbags start to fill Dakota's head on the drive home, likely due to nightmares he told me about a few days earlier. I felt nervous to ask him about them, but he seemed to always draw himself away at any little mention of it.

“Are you going to be okay?” I asked him.

“Yeah, I'm just tired. I might try to take about an hour to rest my eyes before we go out tonight, if that's alright with you,” he sighed.

“Is it the dreams you've been having?”

“Yeah,” he nodded, “They've been getting so detailed, and the message seems so repetitive, I'm worried there may be some truth to them.”

“If they're bugging you that much, you should let it off your shoulders. You can talk to me, Koda,” I begged him.

“Shandra, you know I have always been open with you if something was on my mind. I have never lied to you.”

“I know, it's just that you seemed to be quiet about a few things lately and I want to make sure you're okay!”

“I've just been trying to process it all first, that's all.”

“Then what is it?!”

Dakota sighed, “If the dreams have any truth to them, then it means I'm going to lose you. All Hell breaks loose, I get word you're in danger, but I can't get to you fast enough to help you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I watch you die, covered in blood.”

I froze. “What?”

“I watch you die, violently. Each dream is a little different in how it happens, but they all end the same way; I'm holding you as the last sign of your soul fades away,” Dakota finally admits, “And the look that was in your eyes, I start to see it every time I close mine...”

Dakota's walls started to tighten around the acidic confessions he spilled, as it was a habit of his since the incident with Jessica.

“Koda...” I whispered, *'I don't know what to say.'*

“You don't have to say anything, they're just paranoid nightmares. They'll pass eventually...”

“Are you sure? Maybe there is some sort of hidden message your dreams are trying to tell you, and they're using me to get your attention.”

“Maybe... the possibility has crossed my mind a few times.”

“I've been reading up on dream interpretation, maybe I can help figure it out?”

“If you want to try, I'd be open to it.”

“Okay,” I paused, “You know how this works, just tell me the details when you're ready.”

I could hear Dakota's mind sorting through each dream, just trying to pick out the one most relevant to the future he was afraid he was going to witness. The thought of somehow seeing my own death let anxiety shackle my heartstrings, but my heart also knew Dakota desperately needed my help.

“Last night, that one was perhaps the most intense,” he finally broke.

“What about it?” I asked.

“The dream itself starts out with screaming in the distance, followed by the sounds of gunfire and explosions; and it was fast approaching. You and I were together, trying to help with an evacuation. Jessica was with us, and Olivia looked like she about ten. This huge group was following us to a large object in the distance, I think it was a ship of some sort. The fighting in the distance soon quickly approaches and starts to attack our group, which triggers you and I among several others to join the fight; Jessica took Olivia to cover.”

“Keep going...”

“Bloodshed soon followed. We fought with weapons that seemed to materialize at our will and tore through monsters. We also had almost god-like powers to strengthen our every blow. Endless hordes kept coming at us, pushing our heartbeats so far our bodies started to fly to keep up. The only thing that was on both of our minds was protecting our daughter, and getting her the hell off the planet.”

“Off the planet?!”

“Whatever was happening, it was going to make Earth uninhabitable for most of life. At least, that seemed to be the main premise. And how widespread the fighting seemed, it seemed almost impossible anyone was going to be able to survive. After a while, we managed to escort a good majority of the survivors in our group to the ship. Jessica and Olivia waited for us to get enough of a clearing.”

“Why did they wait? Or, do I want to know?”

“It was so we could say goodbye,” he choked.

“WHAT?!”

Dakota started to cry, his lips attempting to stay afloat so he could finish the rest of his conversation without turning into a blubbering mess.

“Once we got settled, you and I stopped in front of Olivia to say goodbye. She had no clue the plan was for a handful of us to stay behind and keep the attackers at bay long enough for the ships to leave the planet. You started to try to explain to her what was happening, but seeing Olivia break down made it almost impossible for you to finish.”

“Do you remember what I said?”

At this point the descriptions were enough to draw tears from my eyes, each one burning more and more questions through as they ran down my face.

“You started by telling Olivia that she needed to stay with Jessica to make sure everyone was safe; and that we needed to stay to help make sure the monsters couldn't follow them. I could tell you lost Olivia when you said we were staying, which made you follow up with, 'I know it's hard for you to understand right now, but please don't hate us for doing this.' Olivia was at a loss for words, and started crying instantly. Soon she started begging us to come with her. You tried to calm her down but lost control quickly, so I tried stepping in to get her to where she would be easier to manage. I know in a way that makes me sound like a complete asshole, but it was hard for me to hold together long enough to say what needed to be said. I took her, and looked deep into her eyes, to make sure what I had to say burned into her mind.”

“What was that?”

“I told her, that there comes a time in everyone's life where we had to make a choice to help people we love survive through troubling times and that because she was our daughter, the choice she was going to have to make one day was going to mean life or death. I told her life has a way to bring out the strongest people in times of crisis and that it was going to force her into the same shoes we were walking; and that she could either become the hero the world needs or become just like the monsters we were fighting. But just so she would be around to make that choice, and become the person she was meant to be, she had to leave us. I started to break when she gave me the teary, 'but, Daddy,' look, but apparently I was expecting her to do that when I pulled something out of my pocket and put it in her hands. I never got a clear look at it, but it felt like some sort of necklace. I told her that it was a special present I was making for our family made out of pieces of our souls. The parts I gave her were from you and me, and I made the promise there was going to be one day we would come back for it.”

“That's beautiful Dakota...”

“It seemed like a good idea, but apparently Olivia had my stubbornness

and wouldn't have any of it. She started to fight as Jess went to grab her, proceeding to scream to the top of her lungs. She saw the attackers coming closer in the distance, killing many of the survivors we had gathered. In a way, she was revealing we were running out of time. I grabbed all of you in one big hug just to whisper I love you one last time. Then you and I simultaneously yelled for them to run. The dream starts to 'flicker' right as I snuck one last kiss from you and ends right as I watch you burn alive," Dakota finally finished.

My mind froze on the imagery Dakota's descriptions provided in hopes of trying to act as a translator for his night terrors; naturally thinking of my own demise making it harder to process. But a few ideas came to mind from some of the materials I've read in Dakota's mini library.

"Well, the message is complex, for obvious reasons. It might take a while for me to get something together," I warned him.

"The trick for epic dreams is to decompartmentalize them, look at each key point then string it all together," Dakota suggested.

"You already know what it means, don't you?"

"I have a rough idea, but would like a second opinion. No one would be more perfect to get it from than you, under the circumstances we're in."

"Right..." I whispered.

I took Dakota's suggestion and looked at each individual image in his dream to get a better perspective on the situation by placing each one on a metaphorical map. This way there was only two main ideas I needed to focus on; knowing what the sights looked like, and finding the right "roads" to take to connect them all.

"The screaming, and the war, usually point to signs of turmoil in both one's waking life and subconscious," I started explaining, "The ship usually symbolizes your creative mind and indicates a spiritual journey of sorts. You and I using weapons that appeared at will shows a deep self awareness of the earlier conflict and the need to defend ourselves and those involved, especially Olivia. The necklace usually symbolizes unfulfilled desires, where it is broken up it is a clue that your rational thinking is directly tied to your emotions... which is pretty accurate to be honest."

I stopped to think of a thorough explanation. It seemed hard to do, given the circumstances, but Dakota seemed adamant about finding a meaning.

"Well, you have been doing your homework, that's nice to see," he stated, "What's your idea?"

"If this dream isn't in any way a vision, then it means that you are in a state of total conflict that will affect the people you care about the most if you're not careful."

Dakota simply shook his head and took a deep breath, "That was what I

was afraid of...”

“Sorry, there isn't really must else that can be spun from that type of story,” I told him, “It's not like I enjoy the ideas behind it either.”

Dakota seemed to get agitated by my response, perhaps in fear of the dreams actually being prophetic in nature. He scoured through a plethora of thoughts and prayers to try to find an appropriate response to it all. Unable to think of anything, he finds a way to transition the conversation to the next important matter on his mind.

“Well, I know I'm the one that brought it up, but for both our sakes should we shift our focus to the case tonight? I really hate where this is going, if I am to be completely honest...” he suggested.

'This is really scaring you isn't it?' I whispered into his head.

'Like you wouldn't believe,' he added.

“Yeah, sure,” I said, “What's happening again?”

“A single father from Hansen called me, concerned about some activity that seems to center around his eleven year old son. The kid seems to be having nightmares, it getting to the point he talks in his sleep, the father swears he hears other voices talking back to him.”

“How does the dad know his kid isn't 'speaking in tongues' while he's asleep? I swear I've heard you do that a couple times.”

“He actually set up a camera in the child's room, on my recommendation, and was able to prove that was not the case. There is the off chance the kid is a budding ventriloquist...”

I snickered at the thought of the night's activities being triggered by a little boy teasing his dad with fake voices. Dakota would probably have gotten quite frustrated over the idea but even he would have to admit it would be hilarious.

“... I figured you would think that,” Dakota laughed, “The thought already crossed my mind.”

“I'm glad you're thinking of it, because it would be too funny if that was the case!” I giggled.

“You're not wrong. But you'll have to see the video footage yourself, it is actually intriguing to watch.”

Dakota's house emerged from the seemingly quiet street corner, bringing an end to our conversation on tonight's case. I listened to a deep, meditative breath from my guardian giant as the tires greeted the gravel driveway to its halt. Dogs were wrestling near the sanctuary Dakota had in his backyard for them. My eyes soon drew their attention to a large box on his front step. A paranoid jolt rushed my heartbeat as I tried to figure out what may be

inside. Who's to say someone wouldn't try to bomb Dakota because of the night he save Jessica?

'It's okay, Shandra,' Dakota whispered in my head, *'I've been waiting for this to come in.'*

"What's in the package?" I asked him.

"It's a special type of recorder; supposed to help comunicate with spirits in real time. Several of the shows and other groups I network with have had some interesting results from it."

"A ghost box?"

"Something like that, this one is wired with a built in recorder so you can document any results you get."

"Oh, cool, that could really be useful."

"Yes, I really hope so."

Dakota opened the front door and tossed the package to his couch and immediately ran up the stairs. As I heard his large feet press against the ceiling I went into the kitchen to find a drink before joining him for preparation for the night's event. My head kept wondering about the little boy the activity allegedly centered around, particularly why he was being targeted. Kids tend to be more open minded to the concept of spirits, so it wasn't too unusual of an idea but something about it kept nagging at me.

'Hey,' Dakota whispered into my head, *'I got the video of the kid ready if you're still interested. Something definitely has a hold on the little guy...'*

'I'm coming up. I was just thirsty,' I replied.

I made my way toward Dakota's office on the second floor where I found him sitting back in his office chair as his eyes fixated on the computer screen. A dull gray glow emanated from his screen that accented the dimples around his smile.

"We might have a problem, listen closely," he whispered as he handed me his headset.

The soft padding barely helped the squeezing as Dakota readied the tape. My chest started to tighten a bit as I waited for the static hiss to begin. Moments passed that felt like hours while I waited for the young boy to start talking. A silent growl sent shivers down my spine as a voice crept into the hiss, one that didn't come from the boy.

"Bring me the Trinity and Valkyrie."

Chapter 28
The Vergobretus

I took over the mouse to replay the audio clip a few times over just to make sure I understood the voice correctly, secretly wishing for even the slightest bit of evidence my ears were tricking me. The more I played it though, the clearer the message came through.

“Bring me the Trinity and Valkrie.”

“What in the HELL is that?” I yelled.

“I don't know. Whatever it is, it wants us.”

My eyes must've nearly leaped from their sockets at Dakota's suggestion. Dakota barely bothered with the Valkrie idea, often saying he didn't have the “firepower” to pull off what would've been needed to really investigate the possibility. Something about trying to open up a portal of sorts to view my past life... I didn't really understand the concept at the time. But, my own insecurities didn't seem to matter in that moment

“We're going to have to go in, aren't we?

“Tonight at nine is when we're expected to show up.”

“So, what's the plan? I mean we normally have the family stay the night somewhere else, what do we do in this case?”

“The only thing we can do is place some equipment near the child as he sleeps to monitor for any potential spikes in activity during the episodes... if we get lucky enough to catch a bad one.”

“A bad one?”

“The father also mentioned that some nights are worse than others and there seems to be no real pattern. The kid could go a few nights just yakking away then just suddenly stop. I asked if he knew of any fights at school, or if there was any possible behavior change that he might've overlooked, but he firmly believes there isn't anything setting him off.”

“Oh.”

Dakota seemed to freeze for a second, his mind seemingly shutting itself down. I gently shoved him on his shoulder to catch his attention, but something still didn't feel right.

“Dude, are you okay?”

“Yeah,” he moans as he rubs his face, “I'm just tired.”

“Okay... then we should probably get some rest then before we go out.”

“You're right. Go ahead and get yourself comfortable, if you want, I gotta go make a phone call.”

“Oh... okay then...”

Dakota's usual cheery attitude towards a prospective case was absent, which caused me to worry about his overall well being. Since the incident with Jessica, he hadn't really returned to his usual gigantic dork persona, at least not completely. Glimpses would often emerge whenever small children were around, or after he'd watch a comedy special, but never to the fullest. But the way things happen, the way that everything to the day is still unfolding, I guess you'd have to be more concerned about the people who don't change.

I knew it wasn't right to do so, but I attempted to listen in on the conversation Dakota was having. He kept his voice down, and blocked me out from any psychic eavesdropping, but the way he spoke felt like he was receiving orders from someone. At the time, I was under the impression Dakota ran a solo operation, but little did I know he was becoming ingrained into something much bigger than even he could imagine. The only time I was able to get any sort of clue as to what was being said was the one time Dakota raised his voice.

“No, I will not allow any harm to come to that child,” he grunted, “If this is who I think it is, we've got much bigger problems.”

Boy was he right.

After a few more minutes, Dakota came to his bedroom and slipped off his t-shirt before crawling into bed with me. I turned my head to face him, just to read his face before I said anything. After the big blowout that happened just before the raid Dakota always tried his best to tell me exactly what was going on if he was upset with something, often apologizing in advance for potentially being an asshole, and in return I did the same so we could divert meaningless fights. The thing was though,something kept nagging at me, whispering that I should leave this particular “trigger” be, I never understood it until much later.

Dakota had his palm pressed against his eyebrow and took a deep breath as he realized my thoughts were focusing in on him. He tilted his head towards me and sighed.

“How much did you hear?” he asked.

“Just where you said you won't let the kid get hurt, and that this might be something bigger,” I told him, “Who was that anyway?”

“My... uh... new bosses, I guess. There's this group, the guys that took me after the incident. They want me to help them find out what's going on.”

“Are these guys like, 'big brother, secret society,' types? Are they safe?”

“Very, and I don't know. How much info they got on me, on us, on everything... it's scary. They're dangerous but they've got resources that could help us figure this mess out.”

“Koda, are you sure? This doesn't feel right. This sounds like we could end up dead in an alley with no one knowing what happened.”

“I know... believe me I am scared shitless of the very thought of seeing you hurt because of this, but you do know I wouldn't get you involved if I thought something could happen.”

“Dakota no, don't you start,” I shot at him, “Don't you start that. You know I hate when your ego starts to show.”

“I know, I know,” Dakota sighed, “It doesn't change the fact I worry about you and don't want to see you hurt, especially if I did something to cause it. You deserve better than that.”

I smacked Dakota on his shoulder, hard enough for a loud pop to nearly shake the bed and growled, “Dakota, whatever happens you and I can handle it together. You made that promise to me since the beginning, now damn it follow through!”

I noticed Dakota was trying to hold back a few tears, almost making me feel terrible for hitting him, but even he would admit his hard head needed a couple heavy hits from time to time just so he could think straight. He could be an ass but he had the potential to be better, anyone who knew him long enough could say so. His habit of shutting people out when things got emotional turned quite a few people away, I wasn't going to let him do that to me.

“You're right, I'm sorry,” he sighed.

“It's okay,” I assured him, “Dakota... what do you think the best move is?”

“What do you mean?”

“You never try to make a move like this without some serious thought, and you know more about this type of thing than I do. What do you think is

going to be the best thing to do?"

"Honestly, I'm not 100% sure. Like I said, they have the resources to help figure out what's going on but whether or not they can be trusted to not stab us in the back is in the wind. If we move forward, we'll be pretty much walking on a tightrope through a hurricane; and you know as well as I do my balance sucks!"

"Then that's what we'll do. If they can help us, then maybe we can trust them a little bit. If we fall, we fall together."

Dakota's hand seemed to float towards mine and tightly squeeze just to cling onto the very idea I was proposing, almost like it was the only bit of rope keeping him from falling. Maybe it was that way, in that very moment. All that really mattered, no matter how stubborn he got, was that he and I saw this through to the very end. His pulse felt like it was trying to induce a trance to help me fall asleep, maybe cause Dakota knew my own anxieties about the "series of unfortunate events" that would soon follow.

Hours later, we awoke to an alarm Dakota had set on his phone nearly taunting us to consciousness. A sort of country-rock song with a quick tempo at the very beginning Dakota thought was useful enough to yank him out of a deep sleep and get on with the day, yet it was only effective about seventy percent of the time. I woke up when I felt his arm under my neck start shifting to turn off the damn thing.

A quick glance at his phone showed the time as 7:30 pm, enough time for us to gather the equipment, maybe grab last minute supplies, and meet up with the client. Hansen was about a forty minute drive from Dakota's place, pending traffic conditions of course, which gave us plenty of time to go further into detail about whatever subject came into mind. But most of the time, when not much was weighing on our minds, Dakota and I often found ourselves singing and dancing to whatever song was on the radio.

Neither one of us could even attempt to lighten the mood for how scared we were about what was unfolding. Dakota's mind was attempting to play out possible scenarios in order to keep mentally prepared but each one he could muster just seemed to disappoint him. As we neared the house, his heart started beating through his chest, a common symptom when he sensed a potential threat in any form.

Dakota parked his car next to an older model truck. The client came outside to meet us by the car. He was short of breath, jittery, and overwhelmed by the source of a high pitched squeal coming from inside the house.

"Please hurry, it's starting already!" the man shouted.

Dakota charged into the house without grabbing any equipment. His giant feet shook the house with every step, like a hulking beast on the warpath. I looked towards the client, in fear of what was unfolding. Of all the situations I've seen Dakota charge towards, I never saw anything unfold as quickly as it

did that night. It usually took time for the activity to start up, but it was clear it was no ordinary case.

"Help my son! It's never been this bad before! Whatever has got him, is pissed!" the father screamed.

"Alright, Dakota is already on it. I need you to tell me what happened!" I told him.

"I don't know! I told him you were coming and the thing inside him went ballistic."

Heavy thuds ring from inside the house. The sound of wood splitting apart drew both of our attentions, as we were captivated by a blood curling, almost demonic-like, yell. I sensed Dakota's pulse rise to signal his darker tendencies to emerge. He was panicking, for what reasons I never wanted to find out. His shadow danced against the windowsill, just before splitting itself into three. Bright lights seared through the cracks of the walls and nearly melted the windows.

"*Mad ialprg dlugar rit aaf, obelisong toltorn fifis malprg*!" echoed Dakota's screams.

The lights disappeared and very vibrations of the area felt much more relaxed. I felt almost drawn inside the house by the lack of... evil.

'Shandra, I think you might want to get in here. Second floor, first door on the right. I got... whatever neutralized for now so we can get a better look,' I heard from Dakota's mind, *'Bring the father up.'*

"I think it's clear now," I told the father, "Let's go check on your son."

The child's father ran up the stairs, only to freeze seeing his own son levitating and a bloodied Dakota using his powers to hold him in place.

"What are you doing to my son?!" he screamed.

"Mr. Kelly, that is not your son!" Dakota grunted.

"What are you talking about?"

"Look!"

Dakota shifts his hand to make the child's front face us, revealing veins that seemed to be filled with black tar. The boy's skin was as pale as the moon and his eyes... were gone. To this day I have a hard time describing it, other than two empty voids.

"Mr. Frandsen, what in God's NAME is inside George?!" Mr. Kelly growled, "WHAT THE FUCK HAPPENED TO MY SON!"

Whatever was inside little George started to laugh, acoustically shaking the entire building below us. The voice seemed to multiply every second, building up in intensity and pitch. Trickles of blood spilled from Mr. Kelly's ears

as he tried to scream but barely any sound could be made by any of us.

“Alphias, my son,” the boy muttered, “You still find a way to run to your whore even after all these years.”

Whatever was in inside George continued to laugh, almost like he heard the funniest joke in the world. Dakota reacted to the name the entity mentioned, like it was an insult.

“Shut the fuck up you pig and get the hell out of the child!” Dakota screamed.

The laughing finally ceased.

“Don't you recognize your own father, Alphias? I mean it's been a few thousand years but I'd think I would be one of the few you'd recognize. Considering I made you,” the boy growled.

“Why do you keep calling me Alphias?” Dakota demanded.

“Because that is your name, my son, at least that is how your name translates into the language your current form can understand. This is not your first time on this planet, or any other world for that matter. You and your brothers were made to bring about nothing but chaos to the worlds your souls were dropped. You little bitches wouldn't even have to do a damn thing, just by you existing the natural order of whatever realm your sorry asses dropped in would become unstable and cause genocide.”

Dakota's pupils grew as his dark side slowly took over.

“Whatever you are, you get your pathetic excuse of a deity out of the child or else I'm going to rip your multi-dimensional ass to shreds!” Dakota screeched.

“That's my boy!” the monster cried out.

The ground shook as the boy started to mutate. His limbs grew in length, his body grew muscles and spikes, his eyes burning a golden red, and his skin became like volcanic rock. I wouldn't believe it hadn't been there myself, it was a monstrosity unlike anything I've ever seen. Dakota's reaction gave a hint that he knew something about the monster, at least the monsters inside him knew about it. Two energy balls sprang from his sides and formed Dakota's doppelgangers.

“It's about time you emerged. None of your little party tricks like last time! Let's see what you're really made of!”

Dakota's trio of supernatural fighters started to undergo the same mutations; their eyes all turning pitch black, skin cracking with glowing lights flowing in his veins, his bones cracking and expanding, and blinding glares clouding the room around us. They charged towards the monstrous child, the sudden collision and vanishing act shoved myself and the boy's father into the floor. I brushed the dust from my eyes and tried to find everyone. The room was

in disarray, with the body of the the boy lying in the epicenter of the blast. His weak and frail body tried to stand but no strength was within him to barely breath.

I crawled to his side to comfort him the best I could. The dark presence that emanated from him was virtually eradicated from his body. I felt around George's neck for his pulse and barely found a bead beating against his flesh.

“He's alive,” I gasped, “For fuck's sake he's alive!”

“What?” Mr. Kelly, “My god.”

Mr. Kelly nearly tackled me off of his weak son as tears stream from his face. He nearly squeezes the frail boy into him as relief overcomes him knowing that Eliminos was finally gone and his son could come home. I felt a wet trail start cascading down my face just watching the reunion. Mr. Kelly looked at me with bloodshot puddles in his eyes and mouthed the words, “thank you,” towards me.

Before I had a chance to respond a shot of red lightning lit the room in a brief, hellish, glow. I glanced out the window as the lightning continued to shoot across the sky in a rapid pace. Clouds seemed to rip apart as large masses seemed to fly through them. Even those with no such faith in higher powers had to admit a battle was underway, one that was to be determined by god-like beings.

“Daddy,” George weakly whispered.

“Yeah, buddy, I'm here,” his father replied.

“Mom said 'hi,' and my big sister too.”

Mr. Kelly wiped the tears from his eyes, “What did you just say?”

“I saw mom, and my big sister. They said my sister had to go away while she was in mom's stomach but she was able to visit me when I was a baby.”

“That's right bud, Rebecca had to go...”

The spooky moment was interrupted when another series of flashing red lights started to pulsate through the air and thunder endlessly shook the ground below us.

“What is happening?!” screamed the father.

“It's Eliminos Ra,” George whispered, “He's going through with his plan.”

“What plan?” I worried.

“He wants to kill the universe. He... wants to find his kids and destroy everything. He showed me, everything.”

“What? What did he show you?”

“Egypt, where he first came from and what his plan...”

“He was once human, a slave during times when the pharaohs were popular. Eliminos, at least the power source behind him, was drawn in by accident with the pyramids. At least that's what I've gotten so far,” said a familiar voice.

I looked towards the window to find Dakota flickering like an old television, partially transparent. He's watching the ongoing battle going on in the clouds.

“Dakota, what's going on?” I asked him.

“I don't know, Eliminos triggered something that took over. It was a power unlike anything I have ever felt and I'm not even in control,” he tried to explain.

All of our attention was obstructed by another loud explosion rang through the air. We all rushed to the window to see what looked like a large man falling from the sky, towards the house. Dakota's astral form completely disappeared when the body impacted the ground. I ran outside to investigate the impact, finding a large crater in the middle of an intersection just thirty feet from the house where the investigation took place. Mr. Kelly came outside after me.

“What was that?” he cried.

“I don't know, just stay here with George,” I told him.

“You don't think it's your boyfriend, do you?”

“I don't know.”

My anxiety started to take over as I started to run towards the crater. A crowd of people started to gather around the crater, astonished at what was inside. Once I managed to squeeze past a few people, it was easy to tell what had their attention. Inside of the nearly ten-foot crater was a large, gray man with his eyes rolled to the top of his skull. His skin seemed to sag, like he had lost weight faster than his skin could adjust. I slid down the walls of the crater and tripped over the man's chest, cutting my hands on a couple sharp rocks. I turned and laid across his chest to listen for his heartbeat. When I felt his chest faintly beating against my face I sat up and slapped him as hard as I could, leaving small blood smears on his cheek. Barely getting a response from him, I hit him a few more times just desperate to make sure he was okay.

“Dakota,” I cried, “Dakota get up!”

He must've felt me start to tear up as his eyes shut and he had started to moan. He opened his eyes and started to shake as he moved his arms to push his body up.

“Dakota? Please tell me that's actually you in there!” I nearly shouted at him.

Hearing my voice again shook him out of a daze. His arms swung around and grabbed me tightly, almost enough to where I was hardly able to breathe.

“I'm here, my Cherry Blossom,” he whispered, “Mostly.”

His body continued to shake as he loosened his grip on me. The faint sound of sirens in the distance echoed faintly in the crater, barely catching either one of our attentions. Dakota's phone started to ring in the side pocket of his pants. His smartphone had gorilla glass and was wrapped in a case people could drop from the sky ans everything would still work, I guess he really put it to the ultimate test.

He pressed the green button on the screen and held it up to his ear.

“Yes sir,” he whispered, “No sir, no civilians were harmed. The boy's condition is stable, it'll take a while for him to recover. … Yes, sounds good.”

“Who was that?” I asked him.

“Work,” he answered, “We need to go.”

I tried to support Dakota's weight as he attempted to stand. A seemingly large dead-weight with twigs for legs waddled his way next to me as we climbed out of the crater. He seemingly gathered bits of strength with every step, barely able to dig the keys from his pocket and hand them to me. His large frame nearly made the car scrape against the road as he laid in the passenger seat and closed his eyes.

I climbed into the driver's seat, adjusting my feet could actually reach the pedals. Red and blue flashing lights and concussive sirens blared behind us. Dakota glances over his shoulder and sighs.

“It's okay, Shandra,” he whispered, “They know how to find us if they need us.”

“Will they know that they need us?” I asked him, “Nothing ever happened like this before.”

“Not here, no. But this fight has happened before, an infinite number of times. The Vergobretus don't experience time like we do. Where they're from...” he groans, “... the rules don't even apply to them.”

“The Virgo-bray-what?”

“Vergobretus. That's what Eliminos Ra is. I'm not even sure if it possible for his race to even have a name but that is what keeps coming up every time I think about it. I think it might actually be Latin for, 'executive' or something to that effect,” Dakota mumbled as he fought an inevitable sleep, “Basically he's like a god of gods.”

“I though there was only one God?”

“There never was. The Christian being people think of as the 'highest

being' in our world, Yahweh, is a Vergobretus. However, the real Yahweh had nothing to do it. The original 'God' is the universe itself, and each world possesses an avatar that hone's its power. Basically he's one that had a bit more talent in creating sustainable life and Eliminos Ra was jealous. So to destroy Yahweh's creation, Eliminos sends in the only thing he could ever construct to cause total and utter destruction on a scale no being underneath the Vergobretus themselves would survive. We would pass through the realms undetected, planting the seeds for one final battle. Even if we were somehow defeated, Eliminos would bring out everything we learned and put it into new clones."

"To keep causing damage?"

Dakota nodded just before drifting off, his snoring rattling the window his face seemed to plant itself in. I shifted my attention to the road, turning on the wipers to the car as translucent pebbles started dropping from the sky and melted on their impact.

Unknowing of what else to do, I started the car and drove. To where? I didn't know at the time. It's not like there was much home to return to.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dakota Frandsen, Specialist of the Strange and CEO of the Bald and Bonkers Network LLC. Born and raised in Southern Idaho, Frandsen's aspirations and life of high strangeness set his sights high; quickly becoming known on an international scale for his unusual talents. Early in Dakota life, he claims visions of a not so distant future inspired “The Ones Who Walk All Worlds.” These were written back in 2016. Revitalized under his company's brand and with a wealth of new knowledge, who know where the story may go.

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Explore the world as seen through the eyes of Dakota Frandsen! Visit *THE ONES WHO WALK ALL WORLDS: ORIGINS* as teenage Dakota Frandsen as he revisits his first ever novel series inspired by experimentations with Nostradamus prophetic trances to peer deep into our future.

This series was started by Dakota Frandsen at the age of 14, in an attempt to document horrific visions of the future he seemed to be recieving. Believing that there was no possible way for the visions to be true, Dakota crafted this adventure series in order to be done with the revelations, however it seems that much of what he foretold has come true...

Can you spot the visions?

ISBN 978-1-0879-9845-9
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